Scanned by
BSL
Gorgon776

DECEMBER TEXAS RANGERS 1943

BRITISH 9D. EDITION

TEXAS RANGERS

DEC.

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

PECOS POISON

A Complete Full-Length Novel
Featuring the West's Most Famous Outlaw Hunters in Action
By JACKSON COLE

BEST ACTION WESTERN STORIES

The 7-STONE Weakling..

who became "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man"

Latest photo of CHARLES ATLAS, Holder of the title: "THE WORLD'S MOST PERFECTLY DEVELOPED MAN."

NOTE: No other Physical Instructor in the World has ever DARED make such an offer!

I'll Prove in the first 7 Days YOU Can Be This NEW MAN!

— *Charles Atlas*

WHEN I say I can make you a New Man of giant power and energy, I know what I'm talking about. I've seen my new system, *Dynamic Tension*, transform hundreds of weaker, punier men than you into Atlas Champions. Take myself, for instance. I used to weigh only seven stone. I was a sickly scarecrow. Then I discovered *Dynamic Tension*. It gave me the body that twice won me the title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man." It'll work just as big a change in you, too! I'm so sure of it that I make you this amazing offer. At my own risk I'll give you PROOF in even the first seven days that I can make you into a NEW MAN. I'll begin training you on approval. If you don't notice a marvellous change in yourself within a week, you don't owe me a penny.

PUPIL GAINED 18 LB.

"My chest has improved beyond all expectations, as have my arms, and I have gained 18 lb. in weight."
—R. G. W., Chelmsford.

CHARLES ATLAS (Dept. 125-B), 2 Dean Street, London, W.1

I want the proof that your system of *Dynamic Tension* will make me a New Man. Send me your book, *Everlasting Health and Strength*, FREE, and details of your amazing 7-DAY TRIAL OFFER. I enclose 6d. P.O. or Stamps.

Name.....
(Please print or write plainly)

Address.....

.....

Send for 48-Page Book

Post the coupon right now for full details, and I'll send you my illustrated book, *Everlasting Health and Strength*. Tells all about my Dynamic Tension method. Shows actual photos of men I've made into Atlas Champions. Supplies the facts you need to know about your condition. It's a valuable book! Send 6d. P.O. or Stamps —not cash—in sealed envelope (2½d. stamp), for your copy to-day. Post the coupon to CHARLES ATLAS (Dept. 125-A), 2 DEAN STREET, LONDON, W.1.

• EVERY STORY BRAND-NEW •

TEXAS RANGERS

DECEMBER 1943

FEATURING JIM HATFIELD, RANGER

IN

A Full Book-Length Novel

PECOS POISON

By JACKSON COLE

The Lone Wolf Ranger Bares His Fangs When a Vicious Gang of Ruffians Terrorizes the Range—and Plunges into Bitter Battle Against Sinister Owl-hoots Dedicated to Murder and Pillage! 2

Quick-Trigger Short Stories

RANGE WAIF . . . . . **W. E. Carleton 53**
Mogollon Maguire Solves the Mystery Behind Those Teeth-Breaking Biscuits

WIDOW'S CHOICE . . . . . **William Morrison 59**
Deborah Meacham Fancies a Real Western Fighting Man

All stories in this magazine are fiction. No actual persons are designated either by name or character. Any similiarity is coincidental.

Hatfield fired a hasty shot as Kratz pulled the trigger of the scatter-gun (CHAPTER V)

PECOS POISON

By JACKSON COLE

The Lone Wolf Ranger Bares His Fangs When a Vicious Gang of Ruffians Terrorizes the Range—and Plunges into Bitter Battle Against Sinister Owlhoots Dedicated to Murder and Pillage!

CHAPTER I.

DANGEROUS WORK.

BERT WEBB'S ears throbbed from pressure in the shaft. But he was accustomed to that, just as he was to the coal mine's intense blackness, broken only by the yellow, flickering oil lamps of the miners, and to the pervading dust and heat of the underground caverns.

It was not the sort of work a man would be likely to choose. Either he chanced into it or was forced to take it up through dire necessity. Beyond a youth's pride in beating a rough and hazardous game, there was little incentive to drive him on.

Webb was tough, as young as he was—just old enough to vote if ever he had stayed long enough in one spot. In the eerie light from the lamp stuck in a niche of the slaty, corrugated wall, his knotted muscles bulged under a sweated black shirt, and the muscles of his legs threatened to burst the stained, often-washed dungarees. He wore miner's boots, and a cap with an attachment for fastening a lamp to the front.

His crisp, black hair was stuck to his temples by the moisture forced from his brow. Smears of dirt could not altogether

hide his good looks. His eyes were gray and bold, gleaming with interest in life, for the mines had not yet taken their toll of his health.

Curiosity was one of Webb's dominant traits. He wanted to see things and understand them. Driven by this impulse, he had left the anthracite mines of Pennsylvania and traveled across the United States until he had reached Texas where his money gave out. Hearing of a coal mine in Finlay, snuggled at the base of the Trans-Pecos Range, in the west of the great Lone Star State, he had taken a job there.

Mining ran in Webb's family. His father had been killed in a mine accident in Pennsylvania. As a lad, Bert had been taken care of by a farmer and worked on a farm for several years, but had broken loose, returning to the coal fields.

His pick now crunched into the grayish masses of the wall. Layers of it cracked and slid, and Webb leaped back with a curse. The ceiling was close to his head and the splits were widening, with a low, crunching sound.

"Look out, Marty—watch it, boys!" sang out Webb.

Marty Green, another young fellow whom Webb had chummed up with in Finlay, stepped back at Webb's warning, as did a couple of other miners, friends of Webb's, who had been at work in the side shaft.

"Wait at the entrance to the main shaft, boys," ordered Webb. "I'm goin' to talk to Dutch."

He threw down his pick, turned and walked along the uneven flooring of slate back into the main gallery. Other miners were at work in side pockets and, leaning against the wall close to the up-sloping exit, was a huge-bodied fellow in a dirty cap and jumpers. His bullet head was covered with cropped chestnut hair, and he had a hogshead torso. His massive shoulders sloped from habitual stooping in constricted shafts. Bristles stood out on the fatty cheeks of his over-bearing, stupid face. The blue eyes he turned on Bert Webb were round and small. They blinked maliciously.

"Vell, now vot you vant," he demanded. "Don't you never any work do?"

"We've hit rotten slate, Dutch," replied Webb, as the giant foreman faced him. "We'll have to shore up that ceilin' if you insist on goin' farther in. It ain't safe."

"Safe!" sneered the foreman.

"Dutch" Kratz was a Pennsylvania Dutchman and spoke with a guttural harshness unpleasant to the ear. Unlike most of his good-natured, hard-working and physically powerful people, Kratz had only the last characteristic of his kind. Privately Webb believed that Kratz had committed some crime back East and had been forced to run from his old haunts.

There was bad blood between Kratz and Webb. Webb was leader of the decent faction among the workers. The clean, outspoken Webb was trying to organize an opposition to Kratz and his gang of cronies, who held soft posts in the mine and loafed as they pleased, while Kratz drove the others with an overbearing fury. Several accidents, resulting in death to miners, had brought this to a head, for Webb claimed that it was chiefly carelessness on Kratz' part which was responsible.

Kratz reached down and picked up a glassed-in lantern. His hands were wide and gnarled, with thick fingers. The left had two fingers missing, no doubt lost in some explosion of mine gas.

He walked with a shuffling, bearlike gait, acquired from the gnomelike life in the mines. He passed the little group of waiting miners and went into the new incline which he had insisted they open up.

"See—it's like I told you," said Webb, winking at his pal, Marty Green. "All slate. Why don't you listen to me, Kratz? If it's coal you want, swing the other way."

"Shuddup," snarled Dutch. "All of you, some timbers go fetch."

The crew, Webb among them, went to get some of the twelve-inch-thick logs used as props in the mine.

Dragging a timber on his way back, Webb passed Kratz as the foreman returned from the side gallery. Webb went on, deposited the log and swung off for another one. As he made his third run, he moved close to Kratz, who was slouched against the wall in the main gallery, near the sloping exit leading to the outer world. Webb put down the timber and again approached the Dutchman.

"Listen, Dutch, we're wasting the company's time over there. There's nothin' but slate and limestone that way. The main vein of the coal swings northwest into the belly of the mountain. I know a lot about this sort of minin'—"

"Fool!" broke in Kratz. "How many times I got to tell you, your business mind!

Too much you talg, yah. Back in dere—vork! Ve know vot you do—trouble you make, sure."

With a scowl and curse, Webb turned, to head for the inclined shaft where his friends were. As he stooped to pick up the timber, however, Dutch Kratz made a mistake. So far he had kept his hands off Webb, but now he gave him a violent kick.

Bert Webb whirled. He was not the sort of man to take a blow.

He faced Dutch Kratz. The foreman outweighed him by eighty pounds, but Webb had the wire of youth in him. A show-down had been coming, because of that bad blood between them. Kratz hated Webb's quickness of mind and tongue, and the young man's curiosity. Webb's organizing activities, too, had displeased Dutch.

"You shouldn't have done that, Dutch," growled Webb.

He struck out, whipping a right to Kratz's nose. It landed, with all Webb's hundred and eighty pounds behind it. The Dutchman's snout was already flattened, broken at the bridge, and no doubt tender, and Webb's punch crunched in the cartilage.

Kratz bellowed like a stricken animal. He put down his head and extended his great arms, fists flailing as he charged. But the quicker Webb sidestepped and Dutch lunged on.

Turning, he tried to pin Webb against the wall.

"Donkey, vhippersnap!" shouted Kratz, beside himself as Webb coolly avoided his violent rushes, hitting him as he passed.

"If you ever touch me again, Dutch, I'll beat your cussed head in," he promised.

Dutch Kratz paused, straightening up, glaring at him.

"Back to vork go," he ordered. "Back!" He quit trying for Webb.

Webb did not move, pinning the ugly foreman with his gaze. Kratz, fists clenched, took a menacing step toward him, but Webb stood his ground. He was ready to have it out with Dutch then and there, until one of them dropped senseless. He knew Kratz' favorite style of fighting, rough-and-tumble, for he had seen the foreman go after others. Kratz liked to close and get in his grizzly bear hug, crushing ribs and lungs in his terrible embrace.

Yet now he stopped, dropping his eyes.

"Later we talg," he said quickly. "Back you go."

Webb swung, ready for another attack from the rear. He moved with deliberate slowness. Kratz did not come after him.

"Hurry, you!" Webb heard him call.

Webb was half-way to the entrance of the inclined side shaft when he was knocked from his feet, not by Kratz but by the force of an explosion. The ground shook and the thud reverberated in the mountain. A whoosh of dust and warm air, sucked into the vacuum, enveloped him.

But he was on his feet again in a few moments, shaking his head to clear it, and to ease the ringing of his ears. The blast had gone off in the side gallery where Marty Green and Webb's other friends had been shoring up.

Webb staggered that way, but found he was blocked by jagged chunks of slate from a cave-in. Men came running from other sections of the mine at Webb's frantic yells, Dutch Kratz among them.

"That was a nitro blast, Dutch!" shouted Webb hoarsely, seizing Kratz' thick wrist in his frenzy. "Marty's in there and Davis and—curse you, how'd it happen?"

"Leggo!" ordered Dutch. "One of dem fools, in his pocket he must some nitro have had!"

Picks and shovels flew, but the falling roof had crushed Marty and the others in the confined shaft.

After the first shock, Bert Webb was burning with fury. He left the mine, pausing at the exit in the fresh, warm air to sponge himself off at a water trough, but his furious anger did not abate.

CHAPTER II.

A Sudden Change.

It was afternoon and the sun slanted down on the wild summits of the Trans-Pecos mountains. In their east toes snuggled the little town of Finlay, where it had dug itself into the side of the mountain. A single railroad spur connected the settlement with the Southern Pacific, many miles south.

The town, strung out on both sides of the track was a raw-looking place. It had the usual number of saloons, a cheap hotel, a couple of stores, blacksmith shop and livery stable, a freight depot and cattle pens down the track.

Eastward, the hills gentled to rolling, semi-arid plains. Van Horn Creek, issuing from the mountains, watered them, but the

mines discharged black muck into the stream, fouling it for miles. Cattle range occupied the plateau, covered with rustling, hardy bunch grasses and chaparral.

Before the miners had come, ranchers had controlled the vast sections of country. Now, between the two rival industries, there was friction. In Finlay the miners and cowboys came together, and on Saturday nights there were often fights on the streets or in the barrooms.

Near the coal mines above the town were crude wooden barracks where the miners lived, among piles of extracted soft coal. The superintendent's office, off to one side, was a square log building with the company's store, which cheated the miners, but where they were forced to deal, occupying one portion of it.

Bert Webb stalked to the super's office, still seeking to control his rage. He had but one thing in mind as he strode in and banged the door **shut.**

There were three men in the office. One was a long-bodied, swarthy fellow with deep-set black eyes. He was smoking a brown-paper cigarette, held in the yellow-stained, bony fingers of his spiderlike hand. The black suit he wore was decorated by numerous red spots and little holes. His dark mustache was singed and stained from constant smoking, and his nose curved over a thin-lipped mouth.

Another of the three men was in range clothing—leather pants and jacket, and a big Stetson. Colts girdled his waist. He was of medium height, and his legs were as bowed as a wedding ring. He was clean-shaven but his bronzed face was studded with pockmarks. Unpleasant light-blue eyes held the expressionless gleam of agates.

The third man, the one Webb meant to see, was Ernie Ulman, superintendent of the Finlay Mining Company. He was a slight, nervous person with graying hair and a parchmentlike hide.

Ulman who had hired Webb was the only one of the trio with whom Webb had previously had much contact. He had seen the bow-legged cowman around now and then, though, and was aware that the swarthy, inveterate smoker was "Gig" Doone, explosives expert who had an office in the town. Doone supplied blasting powder and nitro to the mines.

Ulman glanced up inquiringly into the young miner's burning eyes.

"Well, Webb—that's the name, ain't it?" he asked. "What is it now? Sick today?"

"No, I ain't sick, Ulman," Webb said grimly. "But four of my best friends were just crushed to death in an explosion below. It was carelessness on Dutch's part. He don't know his business.

"I've seen the devil of a lot down there you should know about. These here accidents cost plenty of money and Kratz won't take no advice. He don't foller the main veins of coal but makes us dig side shafts into the slate—"

The door behind Bert again banged, and Dutch Kratz, breathing heavily, came in and stood glaring at him.

"Here's the man you're runnin' down, Webb," Ulman said coldly. "Have you got the nerve to keep squawkin'?"

"Yeah, I say it again," snapped Webb, eye to eye with Kratz. "Dutch don't know his business. I don't know how that nitro went off but Kratz is dumb and careless. He orders us to dig out slate 'stead of coal."

"Shuddup!" shouted Kratz. "Boss, dis feller no good iss. He von't ge-work. Trouble he makes, talg, talg, talg—"

Ulman jumped up, but he was scowling at Webb and not at Kratz. The young miner was aware of hostility, and of the deep-set black eyes of the explosives man, Gig Doone, which never left his face.

The cowman's right hand hung limp and close to the big walnut stock of the six-shooter at his hip. Webb felt an inner thrill of warning.

"Look here, boy," said Ulman severely. "Maybe you been drinkin', maybe the work below's too much for your tender young hide. Kratz is a veteran coal miner and understands the business a lot better'n a beginner like you."

"Sorehead liar, dat Webb fool," growled the Dutchman.

"I'd like to put a bee in the ear of the man who owns this mine," said Webb.

Ulman stamped his foot in rage. He pointed a finger at Webb.

"We take our foreman's word over any two-bit miner's," he cried. "You're—"

"I quit," Webb said quickly.

"—fired!" finished Ulman.

Webb laughed in his angry face.

"Beat you to it. You're a fool or worse, I don't know. You're responsible for the men who've died below, since you won't hear me. Take your job and go to thunder!"

"Now look here—" blustered the super, and the cowman stuck out his chin, but Webb swung and banged from the office.

He hurried to the barracks, washed as clean as he could, picked up his small pack, and went down the slope into Finlay. The big Grand Central Bar drew him. He passed under the wooden sun-awnings and pushed in the batwings. The interior was cooler, and the sawdust on the floor had been wetted down.

A few men were in the bar, and Webb ordered a drink. While he was consuming it, some high-pitched whoops, accompanied by the thud of hoofs, came from the street and Webb looked from the window as a gang of cowboys drew up and dismounted. Pushing and rollicking with one another, they entered the bar.

They were clean-looking, bronzed young fellows, and Webb instinctively liked them. He edged closer to them, listening to their jokes, but they eyed him suspiciously.

"I'm sick of minin', that's a fact," thought Webb. "I'm leavin' here."

He had saved much of his money, not throwing it around on sprees every payday as did most of his kind. Now, he was thinking, as he left the bar, at least he would not have to starve while he hunted another job.

At the livery stable, Webb bargained for a gentled old mare and a used saddle. In a short time, with his pack tied behind him, he rode out of Finlay across the grassy range, keeping to the trail along the creek.

Van Horn River was low in the summer drought. When, in the melting of spring, it suddenly rose, it would flood its banks, but now the water was greatly reduced and the muck from the coal mine discolored the water, giving it a reddish-brown tinge.

In the distance, black specks that were vultures hovered in the brazen sky. Webb saw cattle in the distance, and a jack-rabbit jumped from a thicket and raced ahead of him. Webb's spirit rose. He sniffed at the aromatic, delicious odor of sage and other growth of the region.

"I'll never be a miner again!" he told the sleepy-eared mare. "By heck, I'll be a cowboy!"

Suddenly the old mare gave an entirely uncharacteristic leap into the air, and Webb, not expecting it and rusty about riding, flew off her back. But it was not high spirits which had made her jump. Her legs buckled as she landed and she sank to the dry ground.

"What—" gasped Webb, rubbing his bruised shoulder.

Something whistled by his ear, like a giant hornet. Now he heard a distant report and realized he was being gunned. A long slug had killed his horse. He threw himself flat. There were some small rocks, limestone, sticking up nearby, and they covered him so long as he kept low. He pulled an old six-shooter from inside his shirt and cocked it.

A puff showed, across the creek, among some flowering mesquite bush. The range was long for a revolver, and he saved his bullets.

After a time, with the hunting slugs failing to do more than spray him with bits of rock and lead, he caught the sound of hoofs behind him, and he looked anxiously about. A girl rode up, staring at him.

"Go back!" Webb called to her. "Somebody's gunnin' me!"

She looked at the dead horse and then across the stream, but did not turn and run. And the rifle fire stopped.

"Who is it—do you know?" she asked.

"No, ma'am. But he killed my horse."

"So I see."

She had a pleasant voice, and Webb took another look at her, to make sure that his first impression had been correct. It had been and now was more so. She sat her gray mustang like a rider born to the saddle, slim and erect in the leather. Strands of golden hair escaped from beneath her Stetson, and her lips were full and red. Her eyes were smiling; deep-blue eyes. And her features were cast in a mold to capture any man's fancy. As they did young Webb's.

"My name's Bert Webb," he told her. "I'm a miner—or I was. I was leavin', though, got fed up, and I thought maybe someone would take me on and give me a chance to learn to be a cowboy."

She laughed aloud at that. He grinned along with her, for her mirth was catching, and she looked prettier than ever. She showed no fear at all, either of Webb or of the hidden gunner who had been trying to kill him.

"I don't know much about the cow business, but I was brought up on a farm," Webb said eagerly. "I can handle animals."

"Can you?" she said dryly. "First, you need one—a horse, anyway. Come on. I can't leave you lying around out here like this! Get up behind me."

Webb salvaged his small pack from the dead mare, and jumped up on the back of

her strong mustang. The animal objected, skittishly, but she easily controlled him and turned at an angle away from Van Horn Creek, moving at a trot.

"Who are you?" asked Webb. "You didn't tell me."

"Rita Oberlin," she replied, as though that settled it.

They rode on for a time. Then a couple of sprawled objects drew Webb's attention, and a rusty-black, bald-headed bird flapped its wings and hissed at them.

"Dead cows!" he exclaimed. "I wonder what killed 'em!"

"The water," explained the girl. "We lose a lot in the summer, when the creek's low. It's the mine that does it, fouling the stream. That horrid coal company is ruining this range."

"Is that right?" said Webb. "You live on a ranch?"

"Yes, of course. I told you. I'm Rita Oberlin."

"Well, I'm sort of a stranger, you know," Webb reminded.

"That's right, a miner." Webb felt it was almost a crime to be one in this country.

"My uncle, Phil Oberlin, owns the Dotted Circle, the biggest spread in the district," Rita went on. "I'm his adopted daughter. My own parents are both dead."

"You suppose your uncle would give me a job?" Webb asked eagerly.

"I don't know. But you can ask him."

Before long they reached the ranch which was spread out on a flat not far from the creek that swung north around big spurs of limestone. Webb took in the large house, one-story, but roomy and comfortable-looking, the stables and bunkhouse. Riding horses were in the corrals and several cowboys were in the side yard.

"Who are all those folks on the front porch?" asked Webb.

The girl laughed again. "You sure are curious, aren't you? You'll have to checkrein it, though, because we don't like being asked too many questions. I don't mind, but the men do."

"Then I'll come to you when I need information," Webb said, grinning.

She rode into the yard, and jumped lightly down. Webb slid off and managed to avoid the lashing kick the mustang gave as it tried for him. Rita led him to the front.

"Unk," she sang out, "here's a candidate for you! His name's Bert Webb. He wants to be a cowboy."

Webb felt embarrassed as all eyes turned on him and several of the ranchers on the veranda snickered. A huge Texas man with tow hair and light eyebrows over frosty eyes, stamped down the steps in his spurred half-boots. His face was red, but Webb was relieved to find it was not anger but simply the way his fair skin had taken the sun.

"My uncle, Phil Oberlin," said Rita. "The boss."

"Yuh're a miner?" demanded Oberlin, frowning at Bert.

"I was, but I quit," Webb said promptly. "I used to work on a farm."

Webb knew that because the girl spoke for him, Oberlin was considering him. Finally the Texan shrugged.

"I'll give yuh a fling at bein' stable boy, Webb," he said. "Don't pay much, till yuh learn."

"Thanks. That suits me fine."

Oberlin had his mind on more important matters.

"More and more cows missin'—and that water's killin' 'em by the hunderd," he said to Rita. "We're goin' to put it up to the mine."

Webb was unaware of the gathering storm over the section, knew nothing of the ranchers' troubles. All he did know was that he was glad to be free of the mine, and that life had taken on a sudden new zest, which he had never known before. It was, he thought, because he had met Rita.

And, willingly, he would meet anything that might be facing these Texans with whom he was throwing in his lot.

CHAPTER III.

NEW BLOOD.

CAPTAIN BILL MCDOWELL'S frosty old face was set in stern lines. He turned his faded blue eyes on the small oldster who faced him across the desk, at Texas Rangers Headquarters, in Austin.

"Now looka here, Robertson," he growled, "that coal mine of yores ain't all there is in Finlay! It's raisin' Cain with the cowmen for miles around. I got complaints from Phil Oberlin, who is president of the Stockmen's Association in the district. He claims that beef is bein' lifted off the range, and he's shore some of it goes to feed the

miners. And that ain't all. The spill from yore mine is pizenin' Van Horn Crik, the main water supply of the range."

Dan Robertson cursed, chewing at the stogy he was smoking. He was a wizened little fellow, full of ginger, however, and an old friend of McDowell's. The two could swear at one another with impunity.

"Shucks, Bill," Robertson replied, "consarn yore old hide. Yuh savvy I got a weakness for cattlemen. Why, I was a cowboy myself, till one day while I was ridin' the range I hit on that soft coal outcrop. The mine paid me for years, but the last few months it's provin' my ruin. Fifteen employees been killed or hurt in explosions. Expenses are eatin' up all I got saved. I was sick last year and went to Chicago to see some fancy sawbones. My manager out there, Ernie Ulman, done okay for a year or so and I trusted him to the limit. Now things have gone plumb to perdition."

"Well, why not ship out a new manager?" demanded McDowell. "Or didn't that occur to yore spavined old brain?"

"I did," replied Dan Robertson.

"Well—what'd he report back?"

"He never did report, Bill. Finally, after failin' to hear from him, I wired Ulman, who replied he never heard of or seen him. Two days ago I get word from the sheriff of Presidio County, south of Hudspeth, that the feller I sent out had been found—what was left of him, anyways, after the buzzards and kiotes finished."

"Huh! I smell rats." McDowell banged furiously on his desk bell, and a scared-rabbit-looking attendant leaped to the open door. "Ask Ranger Hatfield to come in," the captain snapped.

Dan Robertson, eyes narrowed on the doorway, gave a chuckle of admiration as, in a moment more, a tall man stooped to enter the office.

"Meet Jim Hatfield, Dan," McDowell growled.

Too old to hit the gun trail himself—behind Cap McDowell were two score years of brilliant law work for Texas—he still had an ace up his sleeve. That ace was this same Jim Hatfield who now stood before him, a man who had taken up where he had laid down, and had carried on for him with an equal brilliancy.

McDowell's ace of aces stood over six feet in his spurred half-boots. His figure was as powerful as it was tall, with wide shoulders and slim hips, bound by the circlets of the heavy belts which supported his walnut-stocked .45 Colts. His chest was deep and his arms long, with great muscles. His hair was crisp and black. The chin-strap of his big hat was fitted to a fighting man's jaw, and his bronzed skin held the glow of perfect health.

The man's wide mouth relieved the severity of his features. And humor lay in the depths of the lazy, gray-green eyes, shaded by long lashes.

Robertson had looked on big men and strong men many times in the course of his seventy years, but he had never seen the equal of Hatfield.

"Why, he's made of hickory and steel!" he thought, then realized that he had thought aloud, and that McDowell was grinning at him.

Robertson did not have to be told what McDowell knew from long experience—that this big man could strike with the speed of lightning, that under the Stetson, was a brain that matched the mighty physique in cleverness and co-ordination.

"Shake hands with Dan Robertson, Jim," boomed McDowell. "He owns a coal mine out in Finlay, across the Pecos in the mountains. Seems like his manager's gone sour, and there's death and destruction to pay over there, among the ranchers and miners both. It's the sort of job you do best. But it looks extra dangerous to me."

That was only a piquant prod to the tall Ranger. He listened to Robertson's complaints, heard him tell of explosions and disasters in the mine, and to McDowell's retailing of Phil Oberlin's reports on the sad state the range was in.

In half a hour, he shook hands with McDowell and Robertson, and started from the Austin office.

The two old cronies watched him from the window, as he picked up the reins of a magnificent golden sorrel, waiting for him.

"That critter's name is Goldy," explained McDowell, "and he's as smart a hoss as Hatfield is a man!"

The tall Ranger, with a pack at his saddle cantle and a carbine slung in its leather boot under one long leg, was mounted on the sorrel. Goldy danced for a few moments, then swung off with a pace-sonsuming lope, west out of Austin.

"I hope nothin' happens to 'em on my

account!" exclaimed Robertson. "It smells like a mighty dangerous job to me, Bill."

"A plumb plenty will bust loose when them two hit Finlay," prophesied McDowell. "But I'll lay yuh odds of a hundred to one the danger'll be on the other boot, Dan. If it ain't—well, Texas stands to lose the best she's got!"

* * * * *

With his plan of campaign cooked up in McDowell's Austin office, abetted by his captain, and Robertson, Jim Hatfield had headed for the heart of the trouble, the town of Finlay.

The swift golden sorrel had taken him across the many miles to the Trans-Pecos. Short-cutting, Hatfield was near his goal when darkness came on his third day out and riding close to the line of the single-track railroad which ran north from the main line to Finlay. He had rested the previous afternoon, and chose to come up on the town at night, as his plans called for a staged entrance.

It was not his habit to announce himself as a Texas Ranger when approaching a case. He preferred to look over the situation, injecting himself into it in some other capacity than as a lawman, for the latter method would often send outlaws running for cover and lose the officer his advantage.

The warm wind, aromatic with the scent of the chaparral, blew on one bronzed cheek as he rode north. It brought faint sounds to him, metallic sounds, the clang of steel on steel, and deep puffs, like the breathing of a winded giant.

"That'll be the night train," he murmured to his horse.

Glancing back over his hunched shoulder, he could see slow-moving lights. It would be a long time before that train reached Finlay.

"Reckon we'll time it so's it'll look like we pulled in on it," he told Goldy.

He pulled up, dismounted, and unstrapped the pack he had brought from Austin for the purpose. He took off his leather chaps and jacket, exchanging them for a dark coat that nearly matched his pants. Rolling up his big Stetson, he substituted a straight-brimmed, smaller hat. He removed his spurs, and replaced his bandanna neckerchief with a black string tie.

"We better hustle along or the train'll beat us to it," he mumbled.

However, the train, consisting of an express-and-passenger car, two box-cars, and half a dozen open flat cars for carrying coal, with a caboose on the end, ground to a stop a short way from the Ranger. Listening, he guessed that a car was being hooked on, but it meant nothing at the time.

In his new, sober garb, with his Colts hidden under the black coat, Hatfield pushed on toward Finlay.

The gray dawn was at hand when the tall man hit the outskirts of the settlement. He found a corral where a sleepy youth accepted a dollar and let him turn in the sorrel. Then he strolled to the station and watched the train come in.

The small engine huffed and puffed to a shrieking halt, the shackled cars banging together, brakes screeching.

The smell of fresh-killed beef caught at Hatfield's nostrils. It came from a box-car that was hooked behind the caboose.

A few people got off—a couple of miners, some townsmen or businessmen, and three traveling salesmen, judging from their general appearance and the bags they carried. Hatfield fell in behind them as they hurried up the dusty road into Finlay, with the mountains to the westward rearing against the lightening sky.

The passengers were after their breakfasts, and so was the Ranger. Reaching the eating house, he took a table in a corner, and the young waitress, when she had taken a good look at the big fellow, put herself out to please him. He was the sort of man who attracted attention, from men or women, no matter what his garb.

After a hearty meal of ham and eggs, coffee, and some fancy bread which the waitress brought him, Hatfield paid his score and sauntered out, looking over the town. Miners were outside the barracks. They were making ready to go to work in the coal mine up above, and the Ranger's eyes were attracted to the spot. He had studied mining engineering some years before, and knew and liked such work.

CHAPTER IV.

THREATS.

THE settlement, except for the mine, was a typical cowtown, with saloons and general store, and with cattle pens to the south.

About nine a.m., the coal company's office opened, and Hatfield stepped inside the door at the heels of the slight, nervous man, with

gray hair and a wrinkled face, who unlocked it.

Hearing the light step behind him, the fellow looked around and scowled.

"Well?" he inquired. "What can I do for you so early in the mornin'?"

"I was sorta lookin' for a feller named Ernie Ulman," drawled the tall man, with disarming meekness.

"Oh—that's me. What'll it be? Want a job? We pay five dollars a day. Cost you a dollar a day for a bed in our barracks and two for meals. Go see Kratz, the foreman."

"I got a job," said the caller. "So yuh're Ulman."

"Yes, I'm superintendent here."

"Yuh mean, yuh *were* super. I've come to take over the job, Ulman."

The slight man nearly jumped out of his boots.

"What!" he shouted. "Are you crazy?"

"Nope, I ain't crazy," the Ranger insisted gravely. "I just pulled in and, after having breakfast, waited till yore office opened. Dan Robertson sent me from Austin.

Ulman stared up into the shaded, gray-green eyes. They were mild, and the big man had no weapon in sight.

"I don't believe you!" Ulman shouted. "What's your name? I've had no word from Robertson about you—"

"Yuh wouldn't call me a liar, would yuh?" said Hatfield innocently.

One long-fingered hand touched Ulman's wrist. The steely viselike grip took the sting out of the startled superintendent's retort.

"Of course not—I didn't mean that. Surprised me, that's all." Ulman chewed on his lip. "Who are you? Have you got any credentials? I've heard nothin' from Robertson, the owner, I tell you."

"He wanted me to hustle right out, and so I did. Here's my authority, signed and sealed by Dan Robertson hisself. I'll take over today. Yuh can show me the works."

Hatfield could read the shocked incredulity, followed by calculated thought, in Ulman's surprised face.

"He's afraid of me," he thought, "and his conscience hurts. But one thing I'll swear to—he's no outlaw chief. He ain't got the nerve for the job. Workin' for somebody, I reckon."

Narrowly he watched Ulman read the signed papers which Robertson had given the Ranger, making him the new boss at the Finlay Coal Company.

"Uh—yes, h'm, they seem all right," said Ulman at last. "Your name is Jim Hathaway, I see. Very well, I'll do what I can to help you out, of course. I'm much astonished, though, that Robertson didn't wire me you were comin'. Strange."

"Well," Hatfield drawled, "Robertson was sorta worried about another feller he sent here, the one who never made it, yuh see. So instead of telegraphin', he just had me run over and see yuh."

Ulman jumped again, yellow fright springing to his rabbit eyes that hunted over Hatfield's placid face for signs of deep sarcasm, of threat to himself. But he could read nothing in the new super's countenance.

"I—uh—would you like to look over the books?" Ulman asked. "Later I'll show you the works. I—I haven't had breakfast yet, I'm hungry. I'll be back shortly. Sit down and make yourself at home, Hathaway."

He ducked around the Ranger, and shot out the door.

"He acts like he was starvin'," the Ranger muttered dryly.

He went to a side window, where he could see Ulman hurrying down the path to the town. The manager disappeared behind the line of buildings on Main Street, and the Ranger swung and glanced at the ledgers. . . .

Once Ulman was out of sight of the superintendent's office where he had left this disturbing Jim Hathaway, he increased his pace. He made it to Gig Doone's home in record time.

"Wake up, Doone, wake up!"

The alarmed Ulman pounded on the locked door at the rear of the house.

A chain rattled, and Gig Doone opened up. The swarthy, long-bodied explosives man had been sleeping soundly. His crisp, inky hair was mussed, and he rubbed at his deep-set, fierce eyes.

"What the devil's wrong, Ulman?" he demanded. "I didn't get to bed till four o'clock."

Ulman pushed inside, closing the back door behind him.

"It's plenty important, Doone! Robertson's sent out a new manager for the mine! The fellow just pulled in."

Doone scowled, then cursed. He went to the table near his bunk, and rolled a cigarette with his stained, bony fingers and lighted it up. He was in stocking feet, and shirt, having turned in that way after a card game the previous night. His mustache twitched as he took in Ulman's information.

The back room which was Doone's home was a square chamber, sparsely furnished with a bunk, a plain table and a couple of chairs. Doone's clothing hung against the wall on iron hooks. There was a small coal stove in the corner, with a rusting coffee pot standing on its cold top.

Through an open passage could be seen Doone's laboratory up front. A table made of long planks was nailed to the right-hand wall and on it stood a jumble of chemical apparatus—glass retorts, beakers, Florence flasks, burners for heating crucibles, and other vessels. On shelves above were rows of labeled bottles containing chemicals and the various reagents needed in such work—sulphuric and nitric and hydrochloric acids, other liquids, and smaller sealed containers of salts. Test-tubes, some clean, some dirty, were in racks. The odor of the chemicals permeated the house.

A wooden railing separated the laboratory from a narrow space inside the street door, and a small desk was there. It served as Doone's office. Gig Doone specialized in explosives, but he was a practical chemist as well.

"Who's this hombre that Robertson sent out?" Doone asked at last, as he smoked his cigarette.

"His name's Hathaway," explained Ernie Ulman. "We got no warnin', you know. He just walked in after me a little while ago, when I was openin' up."

"Is he alone?"

"Yeah, I think so."

After a time, Doone shook his head.

"It's plain that that old goat Robertson's gettin' leery, Ulman. I s'pose it's on account of that hombre he sent out before, the one Tate caught and dumped on a trip south. I reckon the time has come for us to step it up and take over. We'll squash that two-bit rancher gang at the same time."

"But what about this Jim Hathaway feller?" worried Ulman.

Doone scowled at his shaky partner.

"Yuh act as though an army had pulled in, artillery and all!" he growled. "He's alone, ain't he?"

"Yeah, but—well, he worries me, the way he looks. He ain't what you'd call an ordinary man."

"He can die, can't he, like one?" snarled Doone. His voice had a raw, savage timbre to it. "We'll find out pronto. We've finished with our spade work and now we'll close in."

"Suits me." Ulman sighed. "I'm wore out, scared of what's goin' to happen, Doone. D'you s'pose it'll work the way we hoped? That new manager has got eyes like gimlet points!"

"You can't keep yore mind off him, can you?"

"Well, he's makin' an inspection of the mine this mornin'."

"That's fine. I'll take care of him and everything else, Ulman, so pull yoreself together. If yuh travel with a man like me you got to keep yoreself in hand."

"You better come and make sure of him, Doone," Ulman declared. "He's twice as big as most—and I don't like his way."

"I'm goin' to do just that," Doone assured bluntly. "I'll hustle up and see Dutch Kratz, tell him about what's up, and we'll be ready for Mr. New Manager in a jiffy. You keep his attention in the office for half an hour."

Ulman nodded. He left by the back door and galloped toward the coal mine, as Gig Doone made hurried preparations.

Hatfield had glanced over the books on Ulman's desk and when the little man returned to the office, he was sitting in a chair, his feet on the railing, whistling and staring at the ceiling.

"The books are all right, Ulman," he remarked, as the man he was to succeed shut the door behind him.

"Glad to hear that," said Ulman, with a fine sarcasm not lost on the Ranger.

"Not that I expected to find them books anything but perfect, not with you makin' 'em up," murmured Hatfield.

Ulman blinked, trying to decide exactly how the big man meant this.

Hatfield was deliberately holding himself out as bait. When he had decided to pose as Robertson's new manager, he had fully realized the danger he was putting his head into. The fate of the first agent sent out from Austin made that plain.

"S'pose we go down into the mine, now, Ulman," he suggested.

"In a few minutes. I'd like you to look over this here monthly report, Hathaway. And here are the last six months, filed together. They'll explain a lot about the mine."

"Yuh mean why it's dropped off so much in output?" the Ranger asked bluntly.

"Yes," Ulman said, nodding. "We've hit nasty deposits of slate, and the coal is peterin' out. Takes more and more of the miners' time, cuttin' out that worthless stuff."

"Does it explain, too," asked Hatfield softly, "why so many men have been killed and injured in accidental explosions?"

Ulman chewed on his lip again, and frowned.

"Miners get careless, that's all," he growled, and gulped.

He was not too good an actor, thought Hatfield. He showed his fear, the gnawing of a guilty conscience.

Intrigued by the set-up and wishing to delve farther, Hatfield examined the papers which Ulman presented him with, until the office door opened and a man came in, looking at the two in the office as they swung around.

"Oh—mornin', Doone," Ulman said cheerfully. "Say, this is the new boss, Jim Hathaway. He's takin' up where I leave off. Robertson sent him out as manager in my place. The old man ain't satisfied with the way I run things. I was just tellin' Jim that it ain't my fault. The mine's peterin' out and we've had some nasty accidents. . . . Hathaway, this is Gig Doone. He supplies nitro and blastin' powder for the mine."

"Glad to meet you, Hathaway," Doone said softly.

The two big fellows traded looks. Hatfield felt at once that Doone was strong. The gleam in the deep-set black eyes boldly meeting his, the big-boned frame, exuded power. The Ranger took in the black suit, with the acid stains and holes in the cloth, the yellowed fingers, the crisp, dark hair and curved nose, and the mustache, singed by cigarettes, one of which even now smoldered in Doone's thin lips.

"Hope I can supply yuh with explosives, Hathaway," Gig Doone said easily. "My price is right and I know the mine."

Hatfield gave a businesslike nod. "Hope so, Doone."

"Ulman must have gone after him," he thought. "Is Doone the chief in this?"

"We was on our way to make an inspection," Ulman went on, brightly. "I got to show Jim around."

"Bueno," said Doone. "I'll tag along, if it's all right with you."

CHAPTER V.

First Kill Attempt.

Hatfield had only vague clues, and suspicion, as yet, as he began his probe. Ulman and Doone—and yet how many more were involved and where did the local ranchers fit into the scheme? The crooked manager might be trying to run the coal mine down, so that Robertson would be ruined and Ulman's gang would be able to take it over. Still that did not explain the dilemma of the ranchers.

He meant to uncover it all before he finished at Finlay. He would be ready for them, too, for his Colts were concealed under the black coat.

Swinging, Hatfield strode from the office. He could watch Doone and Ulman, who walked on either side of him, from the corners of his gray-green eyes.

Close at hand yawned the mine adit, a jagged hole in the rugged mountain towering over the settlement. The morning sun, behind them, was golden and warm and not yet cut off by the rising hills.

The Ranger's practiced eyes checked the impedimenta lying about—tools and trash. Small cars, pushed by hand on a narrow-gage track, were used to bring the coal from the depths. They could be dumped into railroad flat-cars below, where a spur edged between the town and the cliff.

Ulman paused at a huge dump of loose, gray-black material. It partially filled in a dip, a split that widened to the north and joined Van Horn Creek. Down it ran dirty waste water from the mine's pumps, and the washings of coal piles.

"Look at the slate that's comin' out," Ulman said, waving at the dump. "I tell you, this mine's petered out. Hardly pays to run her any longer."

The three entered the mine, walking on dust-paved clay, blackened by the coal and slate, crunching under their boots. In an alcove near the adit were hooks on which hung small oil-lamps. Nearby was a drum of kerosene, and boxes of tools. Each man took a lamp and lighted up for the trip into the mine.

For some distance the slope was gentle and warm, stale air blasted in their faces. Holes cut in the mountainside formed a draft for ventilating the mine. Following the narrow little track, they pushed into the earth. Sounds came to the Ranger's ears, the vague noises of gnomes working underground.

A couple of men with blackened faces and stained old clothing came along, pushing one of the little cars. Hatfield glanced at them as they passed and went on with his two guides. Soon they made a turn in the shaft and came out into a spacious underground chamber, from which various inclines and shafts opened out.

"Howdy, Boss," a gruff voice growled.

There were lamps pinned to niches in the slaty walls, and in the yellowish, smelly light Hatfield stared curiously at the man who came to greet them. He was a huge-bodied, sloping-shouldered fellow in jumpers, and with a dirty black cap cocked on his bullet-head. Bristles stood out on the fat, rounded cheeks. The expression in his blue eyes, blinking at them, was stolid.

"Oh, hello, Dutch," said Ulman. "Say, Hathaway, meet Dutch Kratz. He's our foreman. A good one, too. You couldn't find a better one anywheres."

"Glad to know yuh, Dutch," Hatfield said easily.

Other figures stood around, watching; perhaps a dozen men. They did not come closer, but Hatfield was aware of their gleaming, fixed eyes. He had a sensation of warning of impending attack. Kratz was regarding him with his little, marblelike eyes, his thick lips parted over jagged, tobacco-stained teeth.

"So you the new boss be!" he said, in his hoarse voice. There was a faint derision in his tone.

Doone had said nothing as they made the trip down.

"They're all ready for me," thought Hatfield, girding himself for a fight.

He was calculating how he would get out, for now he was certain of their murderous fury, their determination to kill rather than lose their power.

"Show the new boss around, Dutch," drawled Gig Doone. "He's worried about the output. Robertson sent him over to look into it."

"Yah, I show. Come, along wid me valg, mister."

Dutch Kratz ambled off. His gait was like that of an overstuffed bear. The bulging muscles played under his sweated, thin shirt, while his tremendous bare arms flexed, hanging at his sides.

Ready for them, Hatfield trailed along. Gig Doone and Ernie Ulman brought up the rear, as Kratz led the way into a large gallery where men were picking out the veins of coal.

"Main shaft, dis," explained Kratz.

Hatfield's study of mining engineering, as a youth, had often helped him in his work as a Texas Ranger, and now his experienced gaze read the walls of slate. He could see where the coal had been removed from the surrounding matrix of slate and clay. Here and there timber props were set, while at some points the walls had been shored up completely with thick planks to prevent slides.

"Over dis vay now ve work," said Kratz, turning into a freshly dug side gallery, where three miners were enlarging the sides. "For new veins I hunt, yah."

"Yuh've lost the main drift," Hatfield said.

"Huh," grunted Kratz. "Hey—stop, boys."

He addressed the men working. They were bringing down dirt and chunks of slate on the heads of the inspectors. The miners leaned on their shovels and picks.

"Over to Number Four go, boys," Kratz ordered.

Obediently the miners left the side gallery. Kratz led Hatfield to the far end.

"For yourself you see, mister," he said. "A hand-drill I go get. In a jiffy I be back, so vait here."

He turned to amble off, but Hatfield seized his wrist and held him.

"Don't be in such a hurry, Kratz. I'll take yore word for it."

The big foreman scowled at him. "My arm leggo, mister."

"Shore, why not?" Hatfield released him.

For a moment Kratz stood still as the Ranger inspected the wall. A small vein of coal was showing in slaty material, with many cracks and niches. The oil lamps gave off a faint glow in the confined space.

In the silence, Hatfield suddenly caught a faint, whispering sound. His nostrils flared, taking in a smell of burning powder.

"A fuse!" he thought.

He had the sensation of one buried alive, and the walls seemed to be, at any instant, about to close in on him, crush him.

Dutch Kratz gave a guttural curse. He turned again and started to hurry out of the shaft. Hatfield, swinging after him, saw that Ulman and Doone were no longer in sight.

"Wait, Kratz!" Hatfield ordered, reaching once more for the powerful foreman.

But Kratz would not be stopped this time. He swore, and violently struck down the Ranger's arm. Hatfield leaped at him, and the Dutchman half turned on him, snarling. They closed, and for an instant the Ranger felt the terrific strength of the foreman, devastating, rib-crushing.

However, Kratz was in a panic of terror. He fought only to get free, and with a tremendous wrench, broke away from Hatfield and rushed full-tilt from the shaft.

Unable to locate the burning fuse, but knowing from Kratz's behavior that it must be nearly ready to blow off, the Ranger's boots slid with the speed of his retreat as he hustled after Dutch. He saw Dutch's stooped figure turn and disappear into the other gallery.

Reaching the open end of the side shaft, Hatfield sighted a bunch of men, tough miners, with Gig Doone and Ernie Ulman. Dutch Kratz was just joining the party.

Kratz snatched up a sawed-off, double-barreled shotgun which leaned near at hand.

At that instant the charge of nitro which was supposed to catch Hatfield went off and the Ranger was thrown forward on his belly by the force of the explosion. Smoke and dirt whooshed past him.

But beyond bruises and shock, he was unhurt. Kratz had sought to leave him in there to die, but Hatfield's quick mind had reacted in time to save him.

But he was hardly safe. Vague shouts reached him as he came up on his hands and knees and crawled along the wall, trying to get to the exit.

In the dusty smoke, heavy steps warned the Ranger, then Dutch Kratz loomed before him, the shotgun coming up. The foreman's little eyes gleamed with killing rage, and Hatfield had to whip around, frantically, to draw the Colt .45 from its hidden sheath under his left arm.

"Here he be!" roared Dutch.

Hatfield fired a hasty shot as Kratz pulled the trigger of the sawed-off scattergun. His swift movement, the blare of the Colt, saved him from taking the full charge of the buckshot, but one pellet of the spreading lead cut a chunk of flesh from his left arm, between the shoulder and elbow. The shock was electric and he gasped, but fought for control, his brain still cool, muscles co-ordinating with its dictates.

Kratz plunged forward, impelled by his own rush, and lay on his face, not moving. The shotgun rolled out of his huge paws.

"Take him! Shoot him! There he goes!"

That was Gig Doone, yelling to his men. Armed miners, pistols and shotguns in their hands, emerged from the clearing smoke in the big gallery as the drafts blew out the dust in the hot air.

Bullets rapped into the slate walls, hunting the flitting, running Hatfield. He sent a couple of slugs toward them, aiming high to warn them. They were on his left, but closing in to cut him off from the exit. Curses and gunshots rang deafeningly in the main gallery. Props, a turn in the wall, helped cover him in his retreat.

Blood gushed from the slash in his upper arm but he could not let the flesh wound stop him. He made the next bulge, and bullets rattled near him, kicking up slate and dirt. Suddenly he saw before him the exit shaft, and then two big miners, with pistols ready, jumped from behind a small coal car and blocked the way.

"Stand aside, gents!" ordered the Ranger, voice peremptorily sharp over the din of the pursuit.

"Throw down that Colt!" shouted the one in front, and raised his pistol to fire.

Hatfield drilled him through the shoulder, sending him crashing to the earth before he could get his gun high enough. The second man was at his side, though, too close for comfort, and the Ranger slewed around, dropping to a crouch as he fired again, point-blank. There was no time to aim.

The man's gun belched, but the slug hit the dirt between Hatfield's spread legs. But Hatfield had killed the fellow with a shot in the head. The man's nose was smashed in by the bullet and he fell without a cry.

CHAPTER VI.

FUGITIVE.

BREATH rasping in and out of his lungs, Hatfield threw himself around on the other side of the little dump-car. Its metal sides protected him from the bullets that began again to seek his vitals. Doone and Ulman

were urging their hired killers, who were there in the guise of miners, on to finish him.

They could not let him get out. They must kill him, now they had started. Although unaware of his true identity, he could ruin them with his story.

Hatfield started the car up the grade. It was empty and ran on greased wheels up the track. Keeping low, he was able to use it as a screen and, with carefully spaced slugs, to prevent the furious gang from running up too close. He nicked another too eager pursuer before he saw the light of day ahead. Sending a blast from his Colt to keep them occupied, the Ranger put down his head and ran for it.

Outside the mine, they could not yet see him, and he reached the office building before they came spewing from the adit, wildly shouting and firing after him.

"Murder! Stop him!" That was Gig Doone yelling.

A couple of men were by the office but he ducked around to the side. A black horse, saddled up, stood at the hitch-rack, reins dropped over the bar. Hatfield was gasping for breath and his wounded arm was numb. He was not particular how he escaped, and he leaped on the black, snatched up the reins, and drummed with his heels on the animal's ribs.

The black swung around on his hind hoofs. He was startled by the Ranger's sudden appearance and all the commotion. He tried to fight the bit, throwing up his head, but the Ranger brought a fist down between his flattened ears and straightened him into line. The black flew down the slope, Hatfield low over him and urging him on. Hitting the level, he galloped up Main Street between the rows of crude structures.

The shooting and hubbub at the mine had been heard in the town, and curious citizens looked out. But the Ranger had no mind to stop and explain to them.

"Reckon a drink is what I need most," he decided.

He swung the running black over to the long hitch-rail outside the Grand Central, the biggest saloon in Finlay, and ran through the batwings.

"What's up, hombre?" demanded a big citizen in cowboy clothes. There were a dozen men in the bar, staring at the blood-stained Ranger.

"Accident up at the mine—several fellows hurt!" gasped Hatfield. "Hunk of rock cut my arm. Set one up for me and I'll be back in a jiffy."

He hurried on through the building, and out the rear exit into Tin Can Alley. Not far away stood the livery stable where he had left Goldy, his warhorse. The sorrel was in an outside corral and ran gladly to nuzzle his hand. His saddle hung on a peg of the stable wall, and he quickly cinched up, and paid the boy.

"Tie this here cloth round my arm, *muchacho*," he ordered.

The bandage slowed the bleeding, and he led Goldy up the alley and left the sorrel within twenty yards of the Grand Central's rear door. Going inside, he stood at the back of the long bar, watching the street entrance.

The black horse outside drew his enemies. On foot they had trailed down after him, and he heard them shouting as they spied the animal he had ridden.

Hatfield paid for his drink and downed it. He kept his eye on the batwings, and soon saw many legs underneath the swinging doors. Then the doors were banged inward, and half a dozen miners, led by Ernie Ulman and Gig Doone, came in. There were more of them, crowding through, and they lined the front of the Grand Central.

"There he is!" shouted Doone angrily.

Around Hatfield's waist, now, was strapped a cartridge belt with its loops full of brass shells. Colts hung in their supple, oiled holsters and the gang, which had been so eager to come up with him, took pause as they saw them, and saw the determined figure at the far end of the bar who wore them.

There were citizens in between, too, and Hatfield had the bar to cover him.

"Put up yore paws and come out here!" called Doone.

"What's up—what's up?" demanded the excited barkeeper.

"That hombre killed a miner and wounded four more!" shrieked Doone, pointing at Hatfield. "He's a murderer!"

"I'll take care of you in due time, Doone," Hatfield said coolly. "Stay up there, all of yuh, if yuh don't want to get hurt."

Gig Doone's men were armed. They were hard-looking customers, in miner's garb, and yet they did not have the air of decent workers. Hatfield guessed that they were strong-arm gunnies, no doubt hired by Ulman and Doone and paid from Robertson's pocket.

Doone turned and went out the door. Hatfield was alert, ready in case Doone should swing to the rear to cut him off. He figured they would believe that he must grab a horse up front, if he were to escape, and Doone only stood on the porch, shouting to someone across the way.

"Oh, Tuffy!" the explosives man bawled.

After a minute, Doone came back inside, and at his heels trotted a fat man in a corduroy suit and wide Stetson. A silver badge was pinned to his vest. He was the town marshal.

"There he is!" cried Doone, pointing at Hatfield. "He shot down one of the miners in cold blood, Marshal! We got twenty witnesses to it. Arrest him."

The town marshal licked his lips, and stared at Hatfield's slouched figure. The Ranger was in an advantageous position for defense.

"Put them guns down—let 'em drop!" called the officer. "I'm Marshal Tuffy Keith of this here town. Yuh're under arrest, hombre."

"I'll talk to yuh, Marshal, if yuh like," Hatfield said quietly. "But I don't care to drop my guns."

He was certain that if he were disarmed, Doone would kill him. He was not in a mood to surrender, aware that Keith could hardly hope to protect him against the aroused mob.

"Drop them guns, I say!" bawled Keith, losing his temper. His walrus mustache twitched with excitement, and his frosty face blazed red.

"I told yuh I'd talk to yuh, Marshal," repeated the Ranger. "But I ain't givin' up my guns . . . Hold it!"

"Tuffy" Keith, about whom Hatfield had no information, so did not know whether the town officer was honest or one of Doone's followers, started for him, and his puffy hand dropped to the stock of his Colt.

Jim Hatfield had no wish to tangle with the marshal. For all he knew, Tuffy was just a fool. He made a whip-draw, covering the officer, who halted in his tracks, eyes widening at the speed of the Ranger's flicking hand.

"I don't want to hurt yuh, Keith," Hatfield said soberly, "but I can't surrender my guns. Doone and his friends would kill me. I'll explain soon as I can—"

Taking advantage of the marshal's body, which covered him, Gig Doone tried for the tall Ranger. He flipped a bullet along the bar, close over the top, and it cut a hole in the bandage tied to Hatfield's arm. The Ranger leaped back, for the rear exit. He sent a shot back at Gig Doone but the explosives man had dropped behind the front of the thick wooden bar.

Rattled, Marshal Keith thought that the Ranger had fired and missed him. He fell to one knee, pulling his Colt in desperation, believing it meant fight or be killed. His first bullet was too slow, kicking up splinters as Hatfield jumped through, and ran full-tilt for the alley.

Hatfield whistled shrilly and the golden sorrel trotted obediently out to him. He seized the reins, hit leather without touching iron and spurted around the neighboring stable. At a word, Goldy leaped a low fence and, with the buildings protecting them from wild shots, the sorrel dashed away from the settlement.

The country was rough, but it was bright sunlight and Goldy picked the route skilfully. Mesquite and other brush screened them, and glancing back, Hatfield could see the figures of his opponents as they hurried between the shacks, looking for him.

A few mounted and set out in pursuit, but the swift heels of the golden sorrel soon left them behind. Discouraged by the speed of the big man's horse, they pulled up, turned, and trotted back to Finlay.

"We've seen enough of that mine set-up for the time bein', Goldy," muttered Hatfield. "I reckon we'll check up on Oberlin and his pards next. This here wound shore stings."

He kept going, following the winding dirt road that meandered out of town into the ranch country.

After shaking off his pursuers, Hatfield slowed so as not to tire his mount. Some miles out of town, he cut down to Van Horn Creek, crossing a stretch of dry sand in the bed to the trickle of water in the middle of the creek. But no sooner had Goldy put down his muzzle to drink than the Ranger pulled up the sorrel's head.

"I don't like the looks of that stuff," he muttered. Dismounting, he cupped his hands, picked up a scoop, and smelled of the water. He tasted a bit and made a wry face, spitting it out.

"That mine spill ruins it, shore enough!" he decided. "C'mon, Goldy, we'll visit the Dotted Circle and tank up there."

It was warm with the sun overhead. Hat-

field found some shade under jutting red buttes that dotted the rolling plateau. Here he changed from his "store clothes" into chaps, big Stetson and regular riding outfit, rolling up the dark suit and hat and packing them away for future use.

Riding on he reached a fork where crudely carved signs pointed the way to several ranches across the grazing lands where bunches of cows meandered. A dotted circle indicated that the Oberlin place was to the northeast, while the Cross 2 and Lazy R were farther on along the trail. Hatfield set his course for the Oberlin Dotted Circle Ranch.

CHAPTER VII.

Stolen Beef.

Well into the afternoon, Jim Hatfield sighted the low-lying buildings of a big ranch, set on a flat overlooking the stream, which took a bend north. The ranchhouse was roomy and shaded by tall cottonwoods. There were stables, a bunkhouse, and the other usual outbuildings.

Hatfield rode slowly into the yard. The sandy, reddish earth was warm in the heat and dust slowly swirled from under the sorrel's hoofs.

A young man appeared from the shade on the other side of the stable and sang out genially:

"Hullo, cowboy!"

Hatfield swung, looked the fellow over. He had a boyish, eager face, with crisp black hair showing beneath his new Stetson. He wore all the cowboy trimmings—leather pants and black shirt, a brand new bandanna reversed and knotted, stable boots, and a six-gun belt circling his waist. He was clean-shaven and stalwart. But at a glance Hatfield knew he was a green hand.

"Hullo, cowboy," he answered the greeting, as the new "hand" came forward, grinning.

In a candid way that was not exactly of the West, the young fellow informed:

"My name's Webb—Bert Webb. Who are you? I ain't seen you around before."

Hatfield met the gaze of the frank gray eyes.

"Why, what happened to your arm?" young Webb exclaimed. "It's covered with blood!"

"So it is," agreed the Ranger, glancing down in simulated surprise. "A fly musta bit me."

The smile disappeared from Webb's face and he blinked, then shrugged.

"I'll take your horse and rub him down," he said.

"Thanks," said Hatfield. "But I reckon I'll take care of him myself. This is Dotted Circle?"

"Yeah."

"I'd like to see the boss, Phil Oberlin."

"He's around the other side of the porch."

Hatfield nodded and rode around the back of the big ranchhouse. A huge Texan with tow hair and frosty eyes, topped by thick light-hued brows, sat in a chair that was tilted back against the wall, with his big boots crossed on the porch rail. Near him a pretty girl was seated in a rocking-chair, reading aloud from a newspaper. Hatfield caught her words:

"Our forecast is that beef next winter will be scarce and the price will nearly double over last season. Stock should be checked and made ready for quick sale on a rising market—"

She broke off and looked around, her eyes widening as she saw the mighty Hatfield, on the beautiful sorrel.

"Good afternoon," Hatfield said.

"Howdy, howdy!" the big Texan sang out. "Light and set."

The girl was slender and her lips were full and red. She had smiling deep-blue eyes, and her golden hair was a halo.

Hatfield dismounted, dropped his reins, and stepped up on the porch.

"Set," ordered the big rancher. "Rita, some of that cider from the spring-house would go down mighty good right now."

"Yes, Unk."

The girl rose obediently. Then she paused, and the smile left her eyes. She was looking at the bloody cloth on Hatfield's left arm.

"Just a scratch, ma'am," he told her softly.

She went on inside, and Hatfield took a chair near the rancher.

"Yuh're the boss, I reckon," he began. "I'm lookin' for a ridin' job in these parts. I come from the Panhandle."

"Yeah, this is my spread—I'm Phil Oberlin." Oberlin had already taken the measure of the tall man. "Yuh look fine to me, my boy, but it'll be another month 'fore I'll need any extra hands. Yuh're welcome to hang around."

"Thanks. Mebbe I will. Call me Jim."

Hatfield took out the makings and rolled

himself a brown-paper cigarette. It was pleasant and peaceful on the shaded side veranda and the faint sounds of the range were lulling to the Ranger's weary senses. In the somnolence he realized that he needed sleep and time to think.

Rita appeared shortly, carrying a tray on which were glasses and a big pitcher of hard cider, frosted by the coolness from the spring-house near the back door, and a plate of home-made cookies. She set down the tray and poured drinks for the men. Then she went back into the house.

Hatfield quenched his thirst, and the girl came out again, this time with a basin of warm water and some clean cloths. Without saying anything, she knelt at the side of the Ranger's chair and began washing away the dried blood from his elbow and arm where the flesh was torn, though it was a superficial wound. She had a skillful touch as she bound the hurt in strips of clean cloth and fastened them with safety pins.

"Thanks a'mighty, ma'am," Hatfield told her, smiling. "That feels a lot better already."

Sleep clutched at the Ranger's eyes but he knew it was necessary for him to hear the rancher's side of this particular struggle across the Pecos. Such folks were honest, dependable, far different from such men as Gig Doone, Ernie Ulman and their gunny bunch. He thought he knew on which foot the shoe pinched, but he had to check up.

The sound of a horse's hoofs coming in from the trail sent the eyes of the men on the porch toward the rider. Presently a man in range clothing appeared and grinned up at them.

"Afternoon, Oberlin," he sang out, and saluted Rita with the admiration due such a pretty girl.

"Howdy, Panhandle," replied Phil Oberlin.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Tate," Rita said.

"Say, I met Pete Roland," said the man called Tate, "and he mentioned a meetin' here tonight at seven. That right?"

Oberlin frowned. He glanced quickly toward the Ranger and "Panhandle" Tate, who had been chiefly interested in the rancher and Rita, took a good look at the stranger with the rancher.

Hatfield cooly returned his gaze. Tate wore leather and a big, sand-hued Stetson. Two Colts rode at his bunched hips. His legs were bent from much clamping around the barrel of a mustang. His sallow complexion was studded with blemishes, and his light blue eyes bulged as he regarded Hatfield, his gaze pausing for an instant on the freshly bandaged arm.

"Er-hum." Panhandle Tate cleared his throat and sniffed.

"I never seen him before," thought the Ranger. "Wonder if he seen me in Finlay?"

But apparently Tate quickly lost interest in the stranger.

The new young wrangler came swiftly around the corner of the porch, sliding to a stop in the dust.

"Hullo, Mister!" he sang out, "Can I take your horse?"

"Nope," growled Tate. "I'm goin' over home and clean up. I'll be back later."

He pulled his rein and swung his mount, touching a hand to the brim of his hat as he galloped off. Hatfield rose.

"S'pose yuh gimme a hand, wrangler," he suggested, "and we'll tend the sorrel."

"Bueno," Webb said. He was learning fast.

Rita smiled and Oberlin's lip twitched. Secretly the big rancher was amused at the young miner's attempts to turn into a bona fide cowboy. But Webb had kept at it, and had managed to survive.

The Ranger rose. "Thanks a-mighty, Oberlin, and Miss Rita," he said. "I'll stick around a while, if it's all right with you."

He went around to the stable with Webb. The wrangler brought out a brush and currycomb, and they groomed the golden sorrel. After a short drink from the trough of fresh water, Goldy was turned loose in a corral, and Hatfield's saddle hung on a peg in the shed at one side of the barn.

"Obliged," said the Ranger, solemnly, "Yuh're all right, cowboy. Now if yuh got some soft hay in the loft, I'll have a catnap."

"Help yourself," Webb said.

"They say there's a meetin' tonight," Hatfield casually observed.

"Uh-huh. They've been havin' lots of trouble, the ranchers. Lost a bunch of beeves."

Webb, however, had his mind on something else. He was restless, and kept going to the big open door of the barn and looking out.

Hatfield was tired. He climbed the ladder to the loft, found a soft spot, and lay down to sleep. . . .

Some hours later, Jim Hatfield awoke, greatly refreshed. The sun was ruby-red over the mountains, about to disappear. The odor

of fresh-cooked beef came to his nostrils. Going down the ladder, he headed for the hands' dining room where a dozen cowboys, Oberlin's string, were eating supper, Webb among them. At their hearty invitation, Hatfield sat down and ate with them.

Soon after the meal, men began arriving. Hatfield, smoking, hung around the corral as they came in. Webb and a lean foreman, Ambrose as he was called, took over the visitors' mounts, and Hatfield kept track of most of them by name when Webb or the foreman greeted them.

They were sturdy ranchers. Hatfield had met plenty of such men, the blood and bone of Texas. Honest, hard-working, self-dependent, they were fighters.

John Smythe—his mustang carried a Cross and a figure "2" on it—was heavy and large, with white hair and mustache, and faded eyes. An oldster, but with plenty of pepper left in him.

A slim, fiery-headed man, with freckles, was Pete Roland, owner of the Lazy R, as the brand on his mount testified. Tim Anson, of the Chicken Wing, was young and powerful, smiling and good-humored. He had dark hair, fine black eyes, and a jutting jaw.

There were half a dozen more, among them Gans of the Square G and Davis of the Y-3. Every man among them, however, stacked up well in the Ranger's estimation.

It was plain enough to Jim Hatfield by now that trouble threatened these folks. Rustling in wholesale lots was a serious matter, and he could see that they had been unable to check it.

Soon night fell, with a warm breeze springing up, stirring the dry prairie grasses. Lights came up in the bunkhouse, as the cowboys set about starting a card game or mending equipment. The front room in the ranchhouse was bright with the mellow light of oil lamps, and the sound of men's voices rose over the sweep of the brisk wind.

The windows were open and Hatfield strolled over, leaning in the shadows outside beneath one. He could easily hear what was going on at the meeting of the neighborhood ranchers.

Phil Oberlin, head of the local branch of the Association, was their leader.

"Boys," the Ranger heard him saying, "I called yuh together again tonight to put somethin' before yuh. That danged coal mine has about ruined our range, as yuh savvy only too well. Their dirt spiles our main water supply, Van Horn Crik, and some of the beef we've lost has gone down them miners' throats. Fifty or sixty hungry men can eat a lot of meat, day in and day out. I went to see Ernie Ulman, the manager, four times, and he claims he buys his beef ready-dressed from El Paso—gets it on the railroad. Told me to go chase myself. Me, I'm all-fired sick of that mine."

There was a chorus of angry agreement.

"It's got a lot worse the past two or three months," declared Rancher Gans.

"Red Pete" Roland jumped to his feet.

"Boys," he shouted, angrily, "I said this before and I say it agin! I'm in favor of loadin' all the guns we got and goin' after them miners. Let's chase 'em out of the country! They'll think twice about comin' back."

Some felt as Roland did. Those ranchers were in a dangerous mood tonight. They were boiling with rage and ready for a fight, legal or otherwise.

"Now, wait!" ordered Oberlin, holding up a big hand, and frowning. "That ain't the way to do things, boys, 'cept in a few cases, mebbe, as a last resort when yuh're shore of yore ground. We ain't got anything much but suspicion that the mine's responsible for our lost cows. And Ulman ain't got 'em all, by any means. Whoever has been stealin' has done a mighty clever job of hidin' hisself and the evidence.

"The steers was run off in picked bunches, not too large to handle easy and hide. They worked steady and got plenty before we knowed what was goin' on, as yuh all savvy. Our trackers figger they mostly went south, but the sign petered out on shale and beaten ways. They couldn't pick it up, nohow. This is all range country and it's crisscrossed by millions of cattle tracks. Cold trail is impossible to foller."

"I'm still in favor of hittin' Ulman and his gang!" insisted Roland. "I'll bet yuh the rustlin' stops once the mine's closed. Yuh can't deny it pizens our water."

"We ain't licked," declared Oberlin. "I had a real reason for callin' yuh here tonight, boys. Yuh elected me yore president, and yuh chose John Smythe, Tom Anson and me as a committee to look into the trouble we've had, and we got what looks like good news. It'll cost money but we can scrape it up, and it ought to settle all our worries. I got a letter I'm goin' to pass

around for each man to read and chew on. Then we'll take a vote on whether yuh agree with what we've started. Fact is, I already made the order, but I reckon I can crawfish if yuh don't agree to what we done."

Swift-moving hoofbeats, coming in toward the ranchhouse, caused Hatfield to turn and slide away from the lighted window. He peered into the darkness, as mounted men swung in and stopped in the shaft of illumination coming from the open front door.

"By glory, there's that Finlay lawman!" he muttered.

He drew back, crouching near the stoop which hid him, as several of the riders with Marshal Tuffy Keith cut over to the stable and barn. He kept a strict eye on what they were doing, for Goldy was in the corral over there.

"Now what?" thought the Ranger.

CHAPTER VIII.

SUSPICIONS.

SWIFTLY Jim Hatfield found out. The voice of the Finlay law officer, as he entered the ranchhouse living room, boomed loud enough for him to hear from his outside listening post.

"Evenin', Oberlin—gents!" sang out Tuffy Keith. I'm here on business—after a killer. Big feller with black hair and a wound in the arm. He rides a golden sorrel."

"Who told yuh he was here?" growled Oberlin.

"Panhandle Tate seen him this afternoon," said the marshal. "This hombre's handle is Jim Hathaway and he's a dangerous gunslick. He had a fight at the mine and killed a man, injured several more, and shot up the Grand Central when he escaped. He can't get away. We got this ranch surrounded."

There was a sound at the side door, near which Hatfield crouched. He faded back, hunting the dark spots, and seeking to get out far enough to reach the corral and Goldy without being observed.

But his keen ears caught the sounds of men closing in. The side door opened and a man hurried out—the wrangler, Bert Webb. He went over toward the barn.

Hatfield heard him speaking with some of the posse which had come with Tuffy Keith, but paid no attention. He was interested only in reaching his horse. Precious moments were speeding away, and he knew that flight was his only "out" now, for Keith evidently had a large gang of fighting men with him.

"Ulman and Doone supplied 'em, I can bet on that," he thought tightly.

He had his Colts and two belts filled with cartridges, but he did not want to fight now—not if it could be avoided. In the heat of a gun battle innocent men might die.

He passed the kitchen and skipped to the dark side of the bunk-house. Keeping low, he got close to the fence of the corral in which the sorrel ran. Creeping over, watching the yard and moving with Indian stealth, Hatfield made the fence and gave a low whistle.

Goldy came trotting to him. He let down a couple of bars, and as he straightened up, a hard voice, right behind him, said:

"Reach—and turn round slow!"

Hatfield reached. A bullet sent at him would hit Goldy, and in the faint light he could not hope to swing fast enough to down an opponent as yet unseen.

A ray from a bull's-eye lantern, its slide suddenly lifted, blinded his eyes.

"I thought so!" his captor crowed. "I been layin' here, watchin' that sorrel!"

It was Panhandle Tate. His big Colt was leveled, the hammer spur back under his thumb. He did not take his eyes off the Ranger, as he carefully set the small lantern down on the ground, the beam on Hatfield.

"Hey, Tuffy!" Tate bawled. "C'mon—I got him!"

Hatfield poised, weight on the balls of his feet, ready to spring. He had to fight, now, for soon he would be surrounded, arrested, as good as dead. In fact, Tate evidently had plans, for the man suddenly opened his mouth, crying:

"He's tryin' to escape! Halt, or I'll—"

"Cuss him, he's goin' to kill me!" thought Hatfield.

Tate's Colt was not more than eight feet from his body, and steady on him. He caught the gleam of the killer's eyes.

A dark figure, perhaps one of Tate's aides, sprang in from the rancher's rear. There was a sharp crack. Tate's gun exploded an instant later but it had been knocked down and the heavy bullet missed Hatfield and Goldy and plugged into the earth.

"Pronto!" an excited voice cried. "Your saddle's at the fence corner! Get goin'! There's a hundred of 'em around!"

It was Bert Webb, the young wrangler.

"Thanks, cowboy," the big man in whose behalf Webb had interposed said gratefully, and he meant it, emphatically.

"I savvy this Tate sidewinder," Webb said excitedly. "I've seen him before. Hustle! There's a mob of 'em after yuh!"

He rushed away and came back with the Ranger's saddle, as Hatfield brought Goldy around. Together the two young men cinched up on the belly straps and Hatfield hit leather.

"Watch yourself, now," cautioned young Webb. "They're all around . . . Gee, I better duck! Here they come!"

The tall man, the faint light striking the jut of his rugged jaw as he whirled the golden gelding, said, "*Adios*—see yuh again," and spurted around the fence.

Bert Webb, pleased with his success in downing Panhandle Tate, who he had seen hobnobbing with Ernie Ulman and Gig Doone at the mine, swiftly faded back toward the barn.

"Hey, you!" a harsh voice commanded. "It's me—the wrangler," called Webb quickly. "Say, a feller just stuck a gun on me and took a horse. He went that way!" He made an excited gesture in the wrong direction. "He shot a man over there!"

Hearing the explosion of Tate's Colt, the marshal's possemen were hustling to the corral, while shouts came from the house.

"So it's you!" a voice growled, as the wrangler neared.

It was Gig Doone, the explosives man. He wore a deputy's badge and two big six-shooters, and his deep-set eyes glinted as he stared at Webb.

Out in the darkness beyond arose a violent commotion—gunshots and shrieks, hysterical ones. The possemen swept toward it, and Webb was knocked aside in the rush as they hunted the big man Bert Webb had felt impelled to assist.

A rider dashed up.

"He just blasted his way through the line!" he shouted. "Pronto! Let's get after him. He cut away down to the crik!"

Webb felt a surge of relief. At least, that Jim Hathaway they were after had made the first lap.

He was able to slip out of the excited crush, and return to the stable. On the way, he took a peek at Panhandle Tate, who lay as he had fallen near the fence, breathing heavily.

Bert Webb had been sitting in the kitchen with Rita when Marshal Keith had burst in on the ranchers' meeting. Ulman and Doone were with Tuffy Keith, and several roughs whom Webb recognized as being under the thumb of Kratz and the gang at the coal mine, all enemies of Webb's.

Having seen Panhandle Tate at the Dotted Circle that afternoon, which he didn't like, since he was pretty sure Tate was a friend of Ulman's, Webb had thrown in his lot with Hatfield. He liked the big fellow who had come to the ranch.

When Keith had sung out to Oberlin that Tate had informed him of the fugitive's presence at the Dotted Circle, that cinched it for Webb. He had slipped out and reached the stable. Panhandle Tate had passed near the window where Webb had hidden, and had made for the corral to ambush the fugitive.

The marshal might be honest, but Bert Webb knew the caliber of Ulman and Kratz, and many of the posse, who were simply the toughs he had himself tangled with at the coal mine. Grabbing a club, Webb had crept after Tate and laid him out as the latter had crowed over his prisoner, had been about to kill him.

"I better make myself scarce till they leave," Bert Webb muttered. "They might decide to take me instead!"

He went into the barn and climbed to the loft, hiding in the haymow. He could peek out through a crack in the wall boards and see the yard and the lighted ranchhouse.

And he was remembering now how, on his way across the range, after he had quit his job at the coal mine, he had been fired on by a hidden drygulcher. He had been sure, then, that the killer who had tried to down him must have been sent after him from the mine, for he knew he had thrown a jolt into Ulman and Doone by his accusations.

He thought he knew who the drygulcher was, too. For the logical person to have trailed him from Finlay was the cowman he had seen in the office with the mine super. But at the time, Webb had not known who the bowlegged fellow was.

Now he did. He had spied Tate that afternoon. But when he had told Rita of having seen Tate with mine managers, she had pooh-poohed the idea that Tate was a traitor.

"He's a member of our Association," she had said, "and no doubt he was there to complain, like Unk has."

But the more Bert Webb thought about it, the more certain he grew of his ground as to Tate. If Panhandle Tate had been trying for him, Tate would have had to run at sight of Rita. The girl would have recognized him if she had glimpsed him, and would have spread the news about him. And unless he wished to come out into the open, Tate could not afford to do that.

Now it was Tate who had brought the posse to the Dotted Circle Ranch, a posse principally composed of gunmen from the Finlay mine. All his acts cinched Webb's suspicion. He had a shrewd young mind and sharp eyes that missed little.

"I'm goin' to watch that Tate skunk," he muttered. "He's in thick with them thieves at the mine, no matter what Rita thinks!"

As he waited for the yard to clear off his foes, he turned it over and over in his brain. Suppose he caught up with Panhandle Tate, proved the man to be a traitor to the ranchers? That would make him aces high with Rita and her uncle, Phil Oberlin. It would, he hoped, promote him from his status as a tenderfoot to a real cowboy.

"Why, maybe Tate knows what happened to all them cows that have been stolen!" he thought.

He could see himself bringing in Tate, having disarmed the bowlegged sneak, under the gun. Rita's pretty eyes would widen and she would be impressed. Oberlin would be flabbergasted and slap him on the back, maybe let him go out and ride with the rest of the boys.

Bert Webb grinned with happy anticipation as his mental gyrations brought him success.

Then he brought up short, realizing he was counting chickens before they were hatched. Day-dreaming never got anybody anywhere.

"Just the same," he muttered determinedly, "I'm goin' after Tate! I got to know more about him!"

In such manner Bert Webb's dominant trait, curiosity, drove him on into danger.

CHAPTER IX.

Ahead of a Posse.

As the place quieted, the ranchers returned to finish their meeting. The posse had gone in pursuit of the fugitive, and Webb left the hayloft and hunted for Tate. But the man was not in the bunkhouse or the ranchhouse, and Webb concluded that some of Tate's companions had picked him up and carried him along with them.

Oberlin was saying so long to the ranchers who had attended the meeting as Webb finished his search.

Webb was sleepy. He had been up since before dawn, so he retired to his bunk, but he had made his plans for the morrow.

After the ranch hands had breakfast in the morning, Webb helped them saddle up and get started. He learned from them that Tate's ranch lay some miles south of Oberlin's, and that a trail led straight to it from the Forks. It was a small place, the boys told Webb, throwing in the usual banter, good-natured but keen, that they used in talking to the young fellow.

Saddling up, with the sun just growing red in the sky, Webb started from the Dotted Circle as though to have a ride, which he often did. But this time he meant to check up on Panhandle Tate.

After an hour or so, he forded the befouled waters of Van Horn Creek and picked up a rough trail leading almost due south. From a height, covered with flowering mesquite bushes, he saw a plume of smoke in the distance, and headed toward it.

It came from the chimney of a ranchhouse, and Webb was sure that this must be Panhandle Tate's little spread, the Bar T. Working in around a razor-back ridge which cut off the sweeping winds from the buildings, Webb dismounted and crept closer afoot, using clumps of mesquite and rocks as cover.

Reaching a spot from which he could see men in the rickety porch and a couple in the corral yard, he lay flat, observing Panhandle Tate's home quarters.

The sun rose higher, and finally beat down fiercely in its noon strength. But Webb was patient, and he was rewarded after a boresome wait when he saw Panhandle Tate, with a cloth tied around his head under his Stetson, emerge from the front door and go toward the corrals, where wranglers were saddling up several mustangs.

"I gave him a good bop, anyways," thought Webb. "Now, I wonder where they're goin'?"

Half a dozen fellows in leather and big hats, with Colts at their hips, were making ready to ride.

Webb had heard his new companions at the Dotted Circle telling tall tales of the lore of trailing. He decided to test some of their theories, and went back to get his horse as Panhandle Tate led his men out of the yard and trotted slowly south from the ranch.

It was dry, and their dust hung in the air. That was one way to follow, Webb remembered, for you could see and taste the dust in the air and keep back out of sight except on a level, large expanse. He went around the ridge, so that he was not seen from the buildings, and picked up the haze which marked the way Tate and his men were headed.

He found he could keep well to their rear, beyond one rise, until Tate dropped out of vision beyond the next dip. The dust made this possible.

Fascinated by the new game he had discovered, and using his keen young wits, Bert Webb played with death. Curiosity and a desire to help Rita and her uncle egged him on.

It was a long chase. Tate and his men moved at a steady clip which ate up the miles. Lather whitened dark hide of his sturdy mare, a well-broken mustang he liked to ride.

Around four o'clock, the men Webb was following reached wooded country, and he had to change his tactics. There was a winding road, but he had to check every turn before he dared make it. Descending a long slope, he dismounted, scouted the next bend, and saw a horseman swinging into the right off the road.

Leaving the mare, he went into the woods and stealthily moved in. Sounds drew him and, creeping nearer, he glimpsed Tate and his followers driving a bunch of steers from a rough pen made of poles and brush. They headed westward, away from the beaten track, and dropped into a ravine, a dry arroyo whose bottom was covered with pebbles and rounded stones, showing that water had rushed through. In the rainy times, the arroyo would be full to the brink.

Hustling to pick up his black, Webb hung back, letting Tate drive westward through the arroyo. It was a dry watercourse, and led all the way up into the mountains looming beyond the railroad line, which was built at the base of the hills.

The sun dropped low, reddening to a huge disc. At a convenient point, Webb left his mount in the ravine and climbed to a high spot. He looked down, far ahead, and saw the column of cows being pushed as rapidly as possible westward. There was no dust now, for the under-footing was rock and the animals were hidden from any except direct view.

"There's Tate and—one, two, three, four, five— Other one musta rode on ahead." That was Webb's decision as he counted the riders urging the steers along.

He went back to his black and picked up the trail once more, lying well to the rear so as not to run on the rear guard.

The shadows were lengthening in the ravine and over the rolling plains. Night was not far off and it would come suddenly, but Webb kept doggedly on. Reaching a sharp turn in the arroyo, he dismounted again and, afoot, tiptoed to the bend, peeked around. The coast was clear, Tate and his men had passed on a half mile in the lead.

As Webb swung, to take up the chase once more, a hard voice commanded:

"Reach!"

He started, galvanized to the core. The voice seemed to come from the air, and involuntarily he glanced up, even as he clawed the air with his hands.

A man was up there, in a rock niche, a sawed-off shotgun leveled on Webb at close range. It was the missing rider from Panhandle Tate's party.

Webb was no gunfighter. His instinct when attacked or put upon was to use his fists. He was untrained with a six-shooter and the staring muzzles of the shotgun were too far for him to strike at a desperate attempt to knock it aside.

He was trapped—neatly!

At that moment, Bert Webb had no time to think of anyone else, or of anything except the dire predicament in which he found himself. But not too far away on the same land over which he had been traveling all day, another man was thinking of him, and with gratitude.

Goldy, Jim Hatfield's swift golden sorrel, had carried the Ranger away from the Dotted Circle and, after a brief clash as he hit and smashed through the enemy ring, he had won free, tearing across the moonlit plains. They had pursued him for a time but he was too expert at such work to be trapped, and had shaken them off.

Splashing across Van Horn Creek, the sorrel climbed the south bank and streaked

on. The shouts of the foe grew fainter and he rode steadily, low over his pet, Goldy. Even that far back, young Bert Webb had been in the forefront of the Ranger's mind.

"That young Webb feller may be a tenderfoot, Goldy," he murmured, "but he's got the right stuff in him. That shore was a boost he give us."

He had kept going, for some time, until he found broken country, rocks and mesquite, in which he could rest. He needed it and, unsaddling Goldy, he had rolled in his blanket in the bush and slept.

He woke at dawn, greatly refreshed and with the shock of his arm wound worn off. The arm was sore and stiff, but the wound was clean and healing well.

He and Goldy both needed water. Hatfield would not permit the sorrel to drink from the polluted creek, nor would he drink the water himself. After a half hour's search, he located a small waterhole. It was low, and the water was warm and faintly alkaline, but it was potable. Tracks showed that steers and mustangs and deer of the region drank there.

Brushing up after he and Goldy had refreshed themselves from the waterhole, Hatfield had breakfast, iron rations from his saddlebags. Then he rolled a quirly, and as he smoked, he took stock of the general situation.

Gig Doone and Ernie Ulman, with their henchmen, were after him. They feared what he, as the supposed manager sent out by Robertson, might report on the way the coal mine was being run.

"They're runnin' it down, no doubt of that," he mused. "Mebbe hope to get it themselves."

But there were also the ranchers, led by Phil Oberlin, to be considered. The vast numbers of cattle they had lost meant that wholesale rustling was going on in the district—clever thievery, too.

"That train I was supposed to come in on picked up a carload of fresh-killed beef, not so many miles south of Finlay," he remembered. "And where does Panhandle Tate come in? He's s'posed to be a cowman, yet he hustled in and fetched Doone and Ulman when he saw me. That means he knew right away them fellers was after me! Tate could be a traitor. He would savvy all the ins and outs of the country here. And them dead cattle, pizened by the crik water . . . Umm, I got plenty to do here."

Finlay was obviously headquarters for those he meant to bring to book. But he could not ride in to the town with the marshal and everybody roused against him; not in daylight, anyway. He had the day to kill and, with the carload of beef in mind, he started for the railroad, heading southwest toward the mountains over the rolling plateau.

Here and there he saw cattle grazing on the open range. Far in the distance, a faint smoke column marked the site of a ranch. The creek and the Dotted Circle were well to the north, on his right and the railroad lay ahead.

It grew hotter and hotter, and the lather dried on the sorrel's golden hide. Reaching the vicinity of the road which roughly paralleled the track, he reconnoitered. The coast was clear. The smoke of Finlay town showed in the sky miles northward.

The Ranger easily located the spot where the train had stopped, the early morning when he had come in. It was a small siding, a spot where the engine could take on water from a wooden tank filled by a flume running over the hill. Heavy woods, spruce and pine, lined the west side of the track. There was nobody in sight, and Goldy's hoofs crunched in the cinders in which the ties were laid.

Hatfield found a beaten path, over stony ground which left no tracks, winding into the pine woods. It was close in there, though the sun was blocked off. For the rising wall of the mountains also cut off the breeze. But it was a secluded spot, and nearby there might well be a rustler hang-out.

Rustlers were dangerous, of that Hatfield was well aware. They would shoot on sight and seldom hesitated to kill, for if caught, they would be executed by the men they despoiled. So Hatfield moved circumspectly, guns ready for action.

But the peace of the woods was not disturbed. The piping of insects and the soft sounds of Goldy's hoofs on the carpet of needles were all that came to the Ranger's keen ears.

CHAPTER X.

Rustler Depot.

Under the thick roof of the pines there was little growth. Except where the branches swept low to the ground, there were plenty of breaks. Jim Hatfield kept watching the

left-hand edge of the bosque through which he rode, for the mountain loomed steep to his right.

After a slow ride, he saw something that stopped him. He immediately dismounted and studied the dried spots that had taken his eyes. They were on a grayish, flat stone. Looping the sorrel's reins in his left hand, and drawing a pistol, ready cocked as he moved, he swung in off the trail—and in moments more a small cabin loomed up.

The shack, of logs and brush, was cleverly camouflaged in the forest. It was set against a pine-clad hill, the back wall being of clay where the slope had been scooped out. Beyond it, he found a natural basin, screened from all directions, in which cattle had been held and, judging by the numerous dark splotches of dried blood, where they had been slaughtered. Some spots had dripped onto the gray stone he had first examined, when the carcasses had been brought out to be loaded.

Attempts had been made to hide all signs at the spot. But the Ranger's keen trained vision picked out one clue after another. After an hour, Hatfield had pieced them together, and he had also uncovered a buried cache of raw hides, containing a number of local brands, among them the Dotted Circle, the Cross 2 and Lazy R. Tools—axes and knives and necessary butchering equipment —were hidden under the dirt in the shack.

He had found a depot of the rustlers who had been raiding the range!

"Reckon they just kill enough to feed the mine here," he muttered. "They could drive the rest south on that beaten road if they was careful to move at night."

He erased all signs of his investigations and thought it over. There was no telling when the rustlers would again use this depot. Oberlin and his friends must set a guard here and try to trap them at work.

Still, he had more daylight hours to while away and this was as good a place as any. With his usual caution, he hid Goldy back in the woods and took up a station himself atop the little hill which sheltered the shack. He cat-napped for some time, getting ready for his foray into Finlay after dark.

At last night came, and when it did it dropped swiftly over the deep-shadowed woods.

"Reckon I'll be amblin'," he decided.

He had started to get up when a sound caught his ear, one foreign to the woods. He froze, listening

Somebody was coming in from the trail. The noises increased, and he realized that animals were being driven toward the rustler depot. A steer lowed and the stamp of hoofs grew plainer.

Men were with the cows, which were headed into the corral. Hatfield could see their dark figures as they sat their horses. One of them struck a match, to light a pipe. He was half-faced toward Hatfield, and the Ranger recognized Panhandle Tate, his head bandaged under his sandy Stetson. A burly, bearded cowboy sat his horse close to Tate, lighting a quirly off the match.

"Let's get busy, Tate," the Ranger heard this cowboy say. "I don't cotton to that daylight drivin'. Them ranchers are on their ears now and they're likely to spot us."

"Forget it," growled Panhandle Tate. "We're workin' different from now on, boys. Slim's collectin' another bunch and they'll be in to join this herd tomorrer. We'll work day and night, fast as we can."

"But—how 'bout Oberlin and his pards?" insisted the other.

"I tell yuh, yuh needn't worry, Blacky," said Tate. "They'll be buzzard bait before a week's out. I guarantee it. We'll deliver ten thousand head to the Mex, and on the hoof. No more dribbles like we been runnin'. We're cleanin' out this range."

Hatfield's lips were grim and tight. It was as he had suspected. Panhandle Tate was a traitor all right, despoiling his trusted friends. He supplied the coal miners with beef, but he had a larger racket in rustling cattle, making deliveries many miles south to a prearranged market.

"I wonder who's goin' to wipe out Oberlin and his pards," he thought, alarmed for them at Tate's wholesale threat. The bowlegged rustler chief had seemed sure of himself.

The cattle were in the pen and the bars set up. Then, at a low whistle, Tate and his men swung and stared into the darkness toward the trail. A rider came slowly up, calling softly to them.

"Hey, boys—it's me, Rusty!"

"All right, Rusty," growled Tate. "Where the devil you been?"

"Yuh was right, boss," Rusty reported. "There was someone follerin' us. I got him."

"Bueno." Tate shrugged. "Let the coyotes eat him."

"I brought him in," Rusty said.

"What the—why?" asked Tate.

"Well, it's that tenderfoot wrangler from the Dotted Circle. Webb his handle is."

Panhandle Tate cursed. "Yuh shoulda drilled the skunk. Was he alone?"

"Yeah, from all I could see," replied Rusty.

"Light a pine torch," ordered Tate.

Somebody struck a match and started a torch. In its uneven glow, the scene grew clearer. On a black mare, lying over the saddle, trussed like a turkey, lay Bert Webb. A bandanna was stretched across the lower part of his face, gagging him. His eyes gleamed in the reddish light, but he was completely helpless.

Hatfield could also make out the features of Tate's men. They were of assorted shapes and sizes but all had a desperate air about them. Rusty, the one who had captured Webb, was chunky and thick of limb. He had a huge head, crowned with curly red hair, and a brick-hued mustache. His hide was brick-colored, and he was as wide as a barrel.

Panhandle Tate whipped a Colt from his holster, and with a bowlegged, rolling stride, stepped to the side of the mare on which Bert Webb's head hung.

"Yuh dirty spy," Tate snarled. "I'm goin' to blow yore brains out, savvy? I tried for yuh before, when you sang yore piece to Doone and Ulman, but yuh hid behind a woman's skirts. This time I ain't missin'."

He was raising the pistol to kill Webb when Hatfield spoke in an incisive voice that cut into the rustlers as though he had stuck them with a knife:

"Drop the gun and reach, Tate!"

Convulsively, Panhandle Tate left the ground, jumping clear in the fright of the moment. His men froze, jaws dropping.

Tate's Colt fell from unnerved fingers and his eyes widened; he dared not move.

"Now take the reins and lead that black around to the left, Tate, this way," said Hatfield. "Keep yore spare paw clawin' at the stars. If any fuss starts, you die first of all."

Tate gingerly obeyed. His men waited, watching for a chance to strike. The one with the torch held it up, high, frozen in position, like a statue, and it burned brightly in the air, the rays touching Hatfield's chiseled features.

Slowly, Tate brought Webb's black mare to the left and led the animal past the side of the little rise where Hatfield watched. As he made his swing, Tate could see the Ranger, and in the torchlight he recognized him.

"So it's you, Hathaway!" he exclaimed, flabbergasted.

"Yeah, it's me. Keep movin', cuss yuh!"

As Tate led Webb's horse on past, however, the rustler who held the torch flung it violently to earth with a hoarse yelp of defiance, and it went out

Hatfield had been trying to watch two ways at once. His Colt blared, for he had a mental picture of the main group, and his bullets flamed into the space they had occupied, bunched on his right. Somebody screeched and Panhandle Tate began roaring orders.

The Ranger was already moving. The hasty shots they sent at his gun flashes missed as he rolled down the slope, to rescue Bert if it could be done. In the confusion, he tried for Tate but the renegade rancher had thrown himself aside, behind the black, and was down low, running for cover of the nearby pines.

Hatfield's main object at the moment was to save Webb from sudden death at Tate's vicious hands. He had been forced to show himself to accomplish this, though when he had discovered the rustlers' hide-out he had intended to use it as a trap to learn more, to take them red-handed. But that was out. Webb's life must be snatched from Tate.

The bulk of the frightened, snorting black mare loomed before him, as alarmed shouts from his foes hit his ears, and their bullets shrieked through the dark, hunting him. He kept quiet, not wishing to draw their fire to the horse, which he needed. Tate had been close to that spot just moments before and his men held their guns from it, giving Hatfield the instants he needed to seize the reins and jerk the black off to the left, where the bulge of the hill gave them protection.

Goldy waited not too far away in the woods, and the tall officer, leading the black, plunged along as best he could in the darkness, toward the spot where the sorrel stood.

CHAPTER XI.

Secret Plans.

"Now you see how come I got captured," finished Bert Webb.

He lay on his side, resting after his ordeal, head propped on his hand, smoking a cigarette which Hatfield had fixed for him.

The Ranger had reached Goldy, and had headed south, the only way he could go at the moment. Tate and his men were hunting them in the woods, while the mountains blocked them in from the other direction.

In the darkness, Hatfield had made good time, despite rough going, and after leaving the rustler depot well behind, had cut over to the railroad, crossed it and made the rolling, mesquite-clad plains, losing the foe in the shuffle.

Outside of aching hands and feet from the tight rawhide bonds, and a flannel-dry mouth from the gag, Webb was not injured.

"Yuh say yuh worked in the Finlay coal mine, before yuh come to the Dotted Circle?" asked Hatfield.

"Yeah, I did. That's how come I was suspicious of Tate, Jim. He was hobnobblin' with Ulman and Doone. You see, you may not believe this, but I finally got it worked out that they were killin' miners who made trouble—at least, Dutch Kratz, the foreman, was—by settin' off blasts. Dutch's carelessness killed some of my own friends that way. When I raised hob, I was thrown out. I couldn't understand the way they run that mine. I know coal, and I told 'em again and again that they had cut off from the main veins and were wastin' thousands and thousands of dollars diggin' out slate and unnecessary shafts. It got me in bad with Kratz and with Ulman, the manager. Dutch has a bunch with him, too, who don't work. They just hang around and waste more money for the mine owner."

Hatfield nodded. "I've run into Dutch Kratz, Bert. Also Ulman, Gig Doone and Company."

Webb's shrewd young eyes fixed on the Ranger's rugged face as Hatfield drew in on his quirly. Webb was bursting with curiosity as to the real identity of the tall man who could fight with such terrific power.

"Did you really kill a man at the mine?" he asked.

"Yeah, I did. One of Kratz's devils who tried to do me in. I also winged Dutch. They got me down in the mine and Kratz tried to set off a blast to bury me. I shot my way out. Yuh see, the owner of the mine, Dan Robertson, sent me out as new super, and it threw a jolt into Ulman and his pards. The mine's losin' money hand over fist for Robertson—and then, Oberlin's ranchers have been complainin' as well."

"Huh! Well, I'm glad we hooked up, Jim. You saved me from death. Anything I can do, let me know."

"Yuh're all right, Bert . . . Now, we got to plan our next move. It's plain that Tate, Ulman and Doone are hooked up together. Tate's been doublecrossin' the ranchers by rustlin' cows, sellin' some ready-skinned to the mine, runnin' more to the Border. The whole passel of 'em are schemin' to wreck that coal mine till Robertson is busted. Prob'ly they hope to take it over, cheap. On the other hand—" He paused. He was thinking of what he had overheard Panhandle threaten, that Oberlin and the other ranchers would soon be liquidated. If the coal mine was their objective, why should they wantonly destroy the cowmen?

"Gee, Jim, you talk like a detective!" exclaimed Webb.

Hatfield rose, his tall figure looming in the night. A warm wind rustled the drying pods of the mesquite and the horses stamped softly, standing near at hand.

"We'll head for Finlay," the Ranger said. "Tate should report what happened to his pards."

"Reckon he will. Hadn't I better ride to the Dotted Circle, though, and tell Oberlin where them stolen beeves are bein' held?"

Hatfield shook his head. "Tate won't leave 'em there, nor any evidence, either, I might need a guide in town, so yuh better stick by me."

Hatfield did not want to trust the tenderfoot Webb to the mercies of chance. Tate might catch up with him, guessing he would head for the Dotted Circle and seek to ambush him.

Mounting, the two young men swung north, but Hatfield did not ride the trail along the railroad. Instead, he stuck to the open country to the east. The giant shadows of the mountains loomed on their left as they headed for Finlay town, showing as a yellow glow in the sky.

It was late, around midnight, when they cut in, and skirted the cattle pens south of the settlement. A few lights still gleamed, chiefly from saloons. Most of the homes were darkened for the night, though, and the coal mine on the hill lay still and silent.

They took to a back alley and moved toward the center of town, passing the rear of the Grand Central.

"Where does Ulman live?" inquired Hatfield.

"Up the line," said Webb. "I can show you but we can't see from here."

Dismounting, they dropped their reins, leaving the horses in the shadows at the side of a stable. The two went toward the main street, taking advantage of a dark passage between blank walls.

"See that whitewashed place, the first one from the mine?" said Webb. "That's Ulman's."

"He's either out or turned in," observed Hatfield. "Where does Doone, the explosives hombre, hang out?"

"That square house, right across the way."

"He's up late enough."

There were lights at Doone's. As they watched, the sound of beating hoofs reached Hatfield's quick ear, coming from the road south. A couple of riders appeared after a time, galloping into Finlay.

"It's Tate and one of his men!" Webb whispered excitedly.

He and Hatfield kept back in the pitchy shadow of the narrow passage, as Panhandle Tate and the rider with him drew up in a cloud of dust, and threw themselves from their saddles. Tate headed to Gig Doone's. The other man stayed outside with the horses.

Hatfield saw the rectangular panel of yellow light as Doone opened the front door and Tate spoke to him. After a moment, Tate turned and hustled back to his horse. He mounted and rode the two hundred yards to Ulman's.

"Reportin', sure and certain!" said Webb.

"Sh!" cautioned Hatfield. "Now I want you to stay with the hosses, so's to be ready when I need yuh, savvy? I'm goin' to work around to Doone's."

Hatfield hurried back along Tin Can Alley. He cut up past a darkened grocery store, and peeked up the way, to see Tate and Ulman coming toward Doone's. The two entered and the door closed. Tate's man waited outside, holding the horses. His cigarette glowed red in the darkness.

The Ranger wanted to hear what went on inside there, if he could, for to know the enemy's plans was half the battle. Watching his chance, he streaked across the road and made the other side while the smoking rustler's back was to him.

Reaching the alley, he stole up to the rear of Gig Doone's home. Tate's man was out at the hitch-rack along the road gutter, and Hatfield went to the opposite side of the building, hugging close to the wall. It was a warm night, and the windows were open. He could hear voices inside, and beyond the rustle of the wind and the piping of insects in the mountain woods, there was little noise to interfere.

As Hatfield took up his listening post, Panhandle Tate was talking, reporting to Doone and to the nervous Ulman who had hastily thrown on a coat and hurried over to the home of the explosives man, in alarm.

"That blame fool Webb trailed us while we were runnin' the cows over to the sidin'," Tate was saying. "We're always on the watch and I glimpsed a flash of metal in the sky, as the sun hit his belt buckle, I reckon. Anyways, I had Rusty lie back and he caught Webb follerin' us, alone. Rusty brought him over, and just as we were goin' to give him what he deserved, that big manager hombre, Jim Hathaway, jumped us and gunned us."

"He saved Webb," growled Doone. "I thought yuh should know, Ulman. It's a dangerous twist of hard luck for us. We've got to work fast to beat it. Hathaway's the worst nuisance I ever had to contend with."

"He's everywhere!" wailed Ulman. "Who'd have thought some fool old Robertson sent out here as a coal mine man could fight that way!"

"I'm beginnin' to wonder myself," growled Doone. "He must be more'n what he purtends. Mebbe a range detective. We've got to down him, boys."

Doone sat on the edge of his laboratory table, his long body slouched. His deep-set

black eyes glowed, and the brown-paper cigarette he was smoking sent a curl of grayish vapor into the air that already was tainted by chemical smells. He wore black trousers tucked into soft boots, a white shirt oper at the neck, and he frowned as he thought, his dark mustache twitching. With his curved beak he looked like a great bird of prey poised, making ready to swoop down and strike death.

Tate and Ulman awaited their chief's decision, for plainly Gig Doone was the chief of the combination. The other two looked to him for orders, for evil inspiration.

On the long laboratory table stood a bottle, its rubber cork yellowed, partially eaten away. As he ruminated, Doone picked up the cork and replaced it in the neck of the bottle. A label on it read, "HNO_3"—Nitric acid. Another close at hand, containing an oily, white liquid, read "H_2SO_4"—Sulphuric.

Both acids were corrosives, deadly poison, sereing to human flesh. They were used in the manufacture of nitroglycerin, and a flask of the explosive was on the shelf close at hand. There were vessels for mixing it and for transporting it.

Doone scowled, idly touched the flask of sulphuric.

"If I had Hathaway here," he remarked, "I'd fling this in his eyes; they wouldn't be so all-fired bright and keen afterwards." He turned to Tate. "If Webb and Hathaway reach the Dotted Circle, they'll squeal to Oberlin. That means yuh're lynch-bait if they catch yuh. Mebbe we can drygulch 'em on the way back."

"I thought of that," interposed Tate. "I sent two of the boys to watch the trail near the Forks. And I sent another to warn the gang at my place to clear out. Others drove off them cows and I come here. I better keep out of sight."

"Yeah. Collect yore men and stay in the mesquite. Yuh can work at night and hit the trail for the Border. Kratz's boys'll be all I'll need right now, but keep in touch so's I'll savvy where yuh are when I need yuh, Tate."

The work of the Texas Ranger, Jim Hatfield, was pressing on Doone and his gang. They felt the menace of the powerful opponent who had stepped into the arena against them. At first he had seemed easy, a lone man to be quickly disposed of, but each time they thought they had him, he eluded them, popped back with a greater challenge.

"I'm makin' up plenty of extra nitro," Gig Doone told his two lieutenants. "Tate, yuh got any idea when Oberlin and his rancher pards are meetin' again?"

"No, but I reckon I can find out, Gig. I missed that meetin' the other night, on account of comin' to tell yuh where Hathaway was. And then, I got slogged over the head and was sorta dazed."

"A couple of nitro bombs planted right, and we won't need to worry about them ranchers any longer," Doone growled. "Robertson ought to be discouraged by this time, and I figgered on sendin' a man after him if he don't give up soon."

Devilish plans were afoot, but the men of evil who made them could have no idea that the man they most feared was hearing every word.

CHAPTER XII.

Drygulchers Miss.

Jim Hatfield, crouched under Doone's side window, overheard most of that conversation, as Gig Doone ruthlessly plotted to destroy all who stood in his way.

The meeting between the three conspirators was breaking up, and Hatfield silently crept around to the back of Doone's home.

"He's shore goin' a long ways for that coal mine," the Ranger mused. "It's worth money, but not that much! It ain't what yuh'd call a big proposition. And why should he be so set against Oberlin?"

Phil Oberlin and his rancher friends must be warned, and as quickly as possible.

"I reckon it's time I enlisted some fightin' men myself," Hatfield decided, as he carefully made his way back toward where he had left Bert Webb.

Panhandle Tate had mounted and, with his aide, was riding south out of Finlay. Ulman had returned to his darkened shack. Doone, working on his explosives, was still up.

"That you, Jim?" whispered Webb.

"Yeah, it's me. C'mon, we'll head for the Dotted Circle."

They cut away from the settlement, eastward into the chaparral.

"Not that way," ordered the Ranger, as Webb turned toward the beaten trail along Van Horn Creek.

"It's the shortest," protested Webb.

"Yeah? It's so long, yuh might never get there, Bert. We'll take to the mesquite ridges north of the crik."

As the Ranger now knew, Panhandle Tate had men watching the trail to the Dotted Circle. Hatfield figured he could make better time by riding a roundabout way.

They rode to the stream, splashed across, and up the far bank, trotting through rocky, broken country. It was slower going than on the trail, and their horses were tiring. Now and then, he let the plodding black mare, who moved with her head down, enjoy a breathing spell, the Ranger would call a halt.

Bert Webb, too, was wearing out. He came doggedly along behind Hatfield, but he was not inured to such constant riding yet, and he was puffing for wind, though he offered no complaint.

Miles above, Hatfield headed due east over bushed, rolling land toward the Dotted Circle. The stars paled in the sky and a grayish-white line ahead, on the horizon, widened to a band and then threatened the entire sky with its irresistible light. The dawn was at hand. Faintly, the southwest wind brought a sound which the Ranger recognized.

"There comes the night train," he remarked.

"I'll shore be glad to get home," muttered Webb, biting his parched lips.

Before long the sun showed red in the sky, and Hatfield's quick eye took in the outcroppings of gray rock here and there. He had seen more of these formations on the range.

"Limestone," he thought. "Ain't worth anything, though."

The day was well under way when they sighted the Dotted Circle in the valley. Finally they pulled up their lathered animals in the corral yard. A side door opened and Rita Oberlin streaked out.

"Bert!" she cried. "Are you hurt?"

"No," replied Webb. He got down, teetering on his sore, stiffened legs, but he grinned at Rita. "I'm just fine."

The anxiety which had shone in her eyes was replaced by a glowing light, the blue of them deepening. Then, abruptly, she grew angry, her cheeks reddening, and stamped her booted foot.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Bert Webb," she said hotly, "sneaking off that way without telling a soul where you were going! We got worried about you when you didn't come in and the boys and all of us hunted high and low for you. We thought you'd been thrown off your horse, even though she couldn't toss a baby—and that you were lying hurt somewhere, or—or—" She paused for breath.

Webb was alarmed at her anger. He gulped and stammered:

"I'm awfully sorry, but—"

"Don't speak to me!" Rita raged. "I suppose you and your outlaw friend here just had to paint the town red! Oh!" She stamped her foot again and went stalking back into the house.

"What did I do?" wailed Webb, blinking at the Ranger, who smiled. "She's sore at me, and I—"

The cook was leaning out his shack window, grinning at Webb's discomfiture, and a man who had been working in the stable yard was laughing, too. But the yard was empty of cowboys, and the saddles gone from the corral fence.

"So that's the way it is," thought Hatfield, for he had been quite well aware that Rita had shown her true feelings for young Bert Webb. "She may not savvy it herself yet, but she's fallen in love with him."

"I can't understand it," said Webb dolefully. "She never acted like that before, Jim. Maybe I ought to *vamose.*"

"Yuh're a fool if yuh do," replied the Ranger dryly. "That is," he added, "unless yuh like to go out nights."

But he had no time for jesting. Danger was upon them and he must organize against Gig Doone and his powerful allies.

"Bert," he said, "these hosses need attention. You get started on 'em and I'll go put in a word for yuh with Miss Rita."

"Will you? Thanks, Jim!" Webb's face grew less doleful and he led the animals toward the barn.

Hatfield strolled to the side door and knocked, and after a moment, Rita opened it and stood facing him, frowning.

"Well?" she said coolly.

"Miss Rita," he told her softly, "yuh shouldn't be too hard on pore Bert. He was near killed last night. Rustlers caught him and tied him hand and foot. He was follerin' 'em, tryin' to trap 'em for yore sake. They meant to shoot him. He couldn't get home any sooner. All he talked of was you and how he feared yuh'd be worried."

The alarm came back into her pretty face.

"Rustlers! Why didn't he say so?"

"Well, he didn't have much chance. . . . Is yore uncle here?"

"No. He's gone to Finlay with his friends."

"Dog it," thought Hatfield. "They took the road, and we come roundabout!"

Rita was staring past his arm to where Webb was working over the horses, drying them.

"You sure Bert's not hurt?" she asked anxiously.

"He's fine, but he's tired out and hungry, like me."

"Oh—I'm mighty sorry! I'll shake up something to eat in a jiffy."

Hatfield went back to finish up the sorrel, and then the two young men went to the kitchen, where Rita had a meal laid out for them. She smiled at Bert who felt much better. He began to tell her of his experiences, and she listened. Her glance, as she heard how Hatfield had saved Webb, grew softer when she regarded the tall man.

Hatfield stoked up on the hot food and coffee. He needed it, just as Webb did. He listened as Rita and Bert Webb talked, learning that Oberlin and a party of ranchers had started for Finlay at the crack of dawn.

"I can tell you why, now, Bert," Rita said. "They've settled it by this time. Uncle wanted it kept quiet, till it was done, but the Association hopes to buy that coal mine."

Inwardly, Hatfield jumped. Oberlin, already threatened by Doone, would be playing with swift death if he sought to gain control over the Finlay mine. Doone wanted it, and he meant to go to any lengths to take it. "I better hotfoot it for town," he thought.

And tired as he was, ten minutes later he was riding toward Finlay. He had a note written by Rita to her father, explaining about Panhandle Tate.

Hatfield kept off the beaten trail, for Panhandle Tate's two or three drygulchers would still be watching it for him. In the bright light, his keen eyes could sweep the rolling spaces ahead, and he took a short cut to avoid the Dangerous Forks. The going was rough for a time, but he came out near Van Horn Creek with the Forks two miles behind him.

Then something that sounded like a giant hornet plopped into the dirt to his left—a spent rifle slug, from a long range. It had failed to connect. He glanced back as Goldy picked up speed, and caught the glint of the sun on a metal gun barrel. One of Tate's killers had missed.

He rode steadily on until he saw Finlay's structures before him, nestling in the toes of the rugged, frowning mountain. The sun was hot and high, beating down with intensity.

Colts loaded and ready, the Ranger hit the back street and cantered along it. The settlement seemed to be asleep in the midday heat. Only a few citizens were drinking in the Grand Central.

When the Ranger had showed himself in the settlement, posing as the new manager of the coal mine, he had worn different clothing. Tate and some of the renegade's men had glimpsed Hatfield in the big Stetson and leather outfit of the range that he now wore, but it wasn't likely that Tuffy Keith or his possemen would recognize the Ranger's figure at any distance. It was important that he find out what went on so, low over the golden sorrel, and with his hat-brim pulled down, Hatfield searched the town with his eyes.

"Where's everybody?" he muttered.

He soon found out. Doone's place was empty, but up the slope, Hatfield saw crowds of men at the mine.

The office hid his approach and he reached the corner, near the door. Cowboys and ranchers, friends of Oberlin and their retainers, leaned against the front wall. They wore Colts and some gripped shotguns as well. They stared across a space of three hundred yards to the mine adit, outside of which lounged about fifty miners, with Dutch Kratz at their head. These men, too, were armed with scatterguns, rifles, pistols and knives.

Hatfield glanced at Kratz, who was busy glaring at the cowmen. A brown scab was on the left side of the huge foreman's misshapen head, while a bandage bulged at the ear. No doubt, thought Hatfield, it was where his quick slug had grazed when Kratz had come for him in the mine. And now the man was looking for more trouble.

CHAPTER XIII.

QUICK SALE.

GRIM-FACED and heavily armed cowmen blocked the door as Jim Hatfield slid off Goldy and turned to the entry.

"Nobody allowed inside, Mister . . . Oh, it's you, huh?" Red-haired Pete Roland, owner of the Lazy R, and in charge of the outside guard was the man who spoke.

Roland frowned as he recognized the tall man. They had met at the Dotted Circle, and Roland was aware that Marshal Keith and a posse had been chasing the big fellow. However, since he had doné no harm to Roland or to the other ranchers, the red-headed cowman figured it was none of his business whether Hatfield were captured or not.

"Is Oberlin inside?" asked the Ranger. "I want to see him, Roland."

"He's mighty busy. Yuh'll have to wait."

Dutch Kratz was watching. He started forward, peering at the man who had just arrived. Suspicion, semi-recognition touched the evil foreman's face.

"I need to see him right away, Roland," Hatfield insisted, and sang out through the partially open door: "Hey, there, Oberlin!"

He could see the rancher chief inside, surrounded by a dozen men.

Oberlin glanced up. Someone detached himself from the back of the group inside and hurried to the door.

"Jim! By glory I'm glad to see yuh!" An old man seized Hatfield's hand and pumped it with immense relief.

"Robertson! So yuh come out here yoreself!"

It was Dan Robertson, the owner of the coal mine. The small oldster drew Hatfield inside the office, talking as they moved.

"I pulled in on the train early this mornin', my boy. I tried to find yuh right away but they said yuh was in hot water. I told 'em they must be loco, that yuh'd never kill anybody 'cept someone who had it comin', or in self-defense. I been worried sick 'bout yuh."

Phil Oberlin was in charge of the men who were in earnest conversation about something. Ernie Ulman, face drawn and anxious, sat beside Oberlin at the desk. Gig Doone was leaning against the wall, a cigarette smoking in his lips.

He scowled at Hatfield and started forward.

"I got a wire from Oberlin," Robertson explained to the Ranger, "askin' me to sell 'em the coal mine. It don't pay no more, and I've had so much trouble with it lately, I decided to accept. I hopped the first train from Austin, expectin' to contact you, Jim. But when I couldn't find yuh, all I heard was yuh had got into a mess and run for it. Oberlin met me."

"Yuh've sold the mine to the Association?" asked Hatfield.

"Yeah, and to tell yuh the truth, I'm glad to get rid of it. It's been costin' me money and I'm sick of it."

Gig Doone sidled close to them. He seemed to have lost interest in having Hatfield arrested, for he spoke to Robertson, ignoring the tall Ranger.

"You're a fool, Robertson," he snarled. "I'd have doné better for yuh than these ranchers. I wired yuh an offer two days ago."

"That telegram come as I was leavin'," Robertson said coolly. "But I'd already decided to take Oberlin's offer."

"Yuh're givin' it to 'em," snapped Doone.

"That's my business," said Robertson angrily. "I used to be a cowman myself, and Oberlin explained how the mine's bothered him and his pards. If I sold it to somebody else, it wouldn't help the ranchers none, so that's that." He turned his back on the angry Doone.

"All right, Ulman," said Phil Oberlin, shoving some papers at the erstwhile manager of the mine. "Pay off yore miners. We're closin' the hole as of today, savvy?"

"You—you mean you're not goin' to work it?" cried Ulman.

Oberlin shook his head.

"No, we ain't goin' to work it," he said emphatically. "We're shuttin' her up, because the mine's ruinin' our range. It pizens our main water supply, and we've lost a powerful lot of cows."

"But the mine has nothin' to do with rustlin' cattle," objected Ulman frantically. "Why don't you let me run the mine for your organization, Oberlin? We'll guarantee to buy beef from you ranchers, and we oughta be able to figger some way to keep the spill out of the crik."

"Yuh should've thought of all that before," Oberlin said coldly, shaking his head. "No, it's all settled, Ulman. We've had a bellyful of coal minin'. Robertson's give us a real deal and bargain and promised not to be hard on us."

"That's the truth," Robertson declared. "The mine's yores, boys."

Gig Doone was burning with inward fury. Hatfield watched the explosives man, for he knew what a dangerous devil Doone was.

"He won't take it lyin' down," decided the Ranger. "I'll have to keep an eye on him."

He swung, at a sudden commotion behind him, from the door. Marshal Tuffy Keith leaped in, a sawed-off shotgun in his hands.

"Gotcha!" he shouted, aiming at the Ranger.

Hatfield smiled.

"Now looka here, Keith," Dan Robertson exclaimed, "yuh're makin' a bad mistake. You can't arrest him. If he killed anybody, it was self-defense. He's a—" He broke off, blinking at Hatfield to see what the Ranger wanted.

"It's all right, Marshal," drawled the tall man. "S'pose we go over to yore office and have a chat. Just let me pass this letter to Oberlin."

As the big man rode down the slope with Marshal Tuffy Keith, earnestly talking to the town officer, Gig Doone strode from the office of the defunct Finlay Coal Company. Keith was not a tool of Doone's, except innocently. The marshal was none too bright, and Doone had simply used him.

Black fury was in Doone's heart. He had lost interest in Hatfield, or Hathaway as he knew him, although his shrewd mind had not failed to note how Robertson had acted toward his foe.

"Robertson was all-fired shore of him," he thought. "He come from Austin, too . . . Now, I wonder! Is he a Ranger?"

But the chief problem was that the coal mine, which he had planned to obtain for his own ends, belonged to Oberlin and the Association ranchers. It was to be boarded up, and Kratz's gang scattered.

"Curse Tate, the fool muffed this one badly," he muttered.

Panhandle Tate had been his spy, informing him of all that the ranchers were planning. But at the vital moment, Tate had been chasing Jim Hathaway or rustling cattle. Doone had learned that Oberlin had secretly wired Robertson the offer for the mine, but it had all been done so quietly, and so swiftly, that it was an accomplished fact before Ulman and Doone even knew that Robertson had come to Finlay.

A call behind him caused him to pause and turn, on his way back to his office. It was Ernie Ulman. The little manager was in a dither, shaking with nervous excitement.

"Doone!" he gasped, puffing as he ran up. "We're licked!"

"Are we?" snarled Doone. "We would be if I had to depend on stupid fools like you and Panhandle Tate! The jackass overrustled this range, and he was so busy runnin' his moth-eaten cows that he muffed the main play. Do yuh realize what's happened? We ran down the mine just as we figgered to do, and discourage Robertson so's we could take it for a song. Then, by jumpin' Jupiter, Oberlin steps in and gets the benefit of all our work! It's enough to make a man bite nails."

His long legs moved faster and faster, until Ulman had to trot to keep up with him in his rage.

"What'll we do?" panted Ulman. "Shall we go somewheres else?"

"Who, me?" Doone laughed, but there was no mirth in the sound. He had rolled another brown-paper cigarette and lit it off the stub of the one he was smoking. "I ain't the kind who quits, not with a million dollars in sight. I figgered I'd have to break down them ranchers sooner or later, and it'll be sooner now. You trot on back and tell Kratz I want to see him."

"All right. But we'll hafta let most of the boys go, Doone. We'll lose our shirts if we try to pay a gang like that. It was fine while Robertson was footin' the bill, but now—"

"Go tell Kratz I want him."

Ulman blinked. He knew the evil moods of this man, and he feared Gig Doone.

"Somebody's goin' to die for this," he muttered, as he hustled back to contact Dutch Kratz.

Doone lit another cigarette, chin down as he rapidly replanned his attack. Oberlin, by his secret contact with Robertson, his purchase of the mine, and Tate's slip-up in failing to report the rancher's intentions, had thrown him off the track for the moment.

The explosives man wore no weapon in sight, though he did carry a single .38, short-barreled revolver, hung on a cord under his shirt. But he was armed with far more powerful weapons—in special loop pockets were hidden half a dozen circular metal tubes filled with nitro. These hand-fashioned bombs of Doone's were an inch in diameter and only six inches long, but one of them could destroy a whole band of men if detonated among them.

Gig Doone had a fierce, reckless nature; he was proud, with an egotistical mania which drove him on to hunt wealth and the power that it brought with it. Born and

bred in the slums of Chicago, Doone had been in trouble with the police at an early age and he hated his fellowmen. Starved in his youth, his nature had turned in on itself, and as he had grown stronger and older, he had taken whatever he wanted any way he could.

The small bombs were fairly safe to carry around, though nitro was ticklish stuff. It might explode at a sneeze or gentle jolt, but Doone was so well-acquainted with its vagaries, so used to handling it, that he seldom thought of the danger. He believed that he had the secret of making the explosive obedient to his will, by mixing it with another substance.

He was, then, a walking arsenal, a peril not only to himself but to anybody near him. And so desperate was he that he would gladly have died rather than submit to arrest. He would take any man who tried for him along with him—he had sworn that.

Doone drew in a deep breath of hot cigarette smoke, and glanced up as he exhaled. Marshal Tuffy Keith came strolling along the sidewalk, and Doone laughed inwardly, then went out the front door to confront him as though by chance.

"Why, howdy, Doone."

Doone knew instantly that Keith had been warned against him, undoubtedly by the big man, Jim Hathaway, as he called himself, who had come there posing as manager of the mine. Tuffy was no actor. He was too open by nature for that, and he was upset because he had been led astray by Doone.

"Did that Ranger leave town yet?" Doone asked casually.

"Yeah, he figgered it's all settled so—" Keith broke off, scowling at Doone. "Who do yuh mean?" he finished lamely.

Doone smiled. "Why, Hathaway, if that's his handle, Marshal. I'm mighty sorry about the mix-up, and so is Ulman. Hathaway did kill a miner, though. Mebbe it was self-defense but the boys said different. That's all."

"Huh," grunted Keith, stiffly. He gave a short nod and walked on, looking sour.

Gig Doone was too clever to move until the coast was clear. Tuffy Keith, of course, was a joke, easily outwitted, but a Ranger was another matter.

"I wonder if he's really goin'?" he mused, staring down the long, dusty main street to where the big man on the golden sorrel was moving slowly south, heading for the outtrail.

Doone watched him for a time, until the station hid the lone rider.

"Hi, Boss," a gruff voice said at his elbow. "Me you vant?"

Doone swung. Dutch Kratz stood there, glowering at him.

"Yeah, come on in, Dutch. I've got plenty for yuh to do. First, I want yuh to take our boys back into the *monte* and set up camp there. You know where the Silver Springs are?"

"Yeah, I know."

"Hold 'em there. I'll guarantee their wages. I got a special job for you, Dutch. We'll talk it over inside."

Doone led the gorilla-like Kratz into the office.

CHAPTER XIV.

Cow Thieves.

For a time Hatfield moved south on the road. Then he slowed Goldy, and glanced back over a big, hunched shoulder. He yawned. The sun was warm and it was a long while since he had had any real sleep.

The sale of the coal mine to the ranchers had taken him by surprise, just as it had Doone for he had not been expecting that.

"But Doone won't quit," he mused again, as he pushed into some chaparral up the ridge, hunting for a bed. "Ulman would, and Kratz does what he's told. But Doone ain't the brand who gives up a good thing. He's got more reason to hit Oberlin and his pards than he had before."

He did not believe that Doone would strike in daylight. The ranchers had plenty of fighters, alert, well-armed, and better shots than Kratz's gunnies. Oberlin was ready for a scrap and Doone obviously was taken aback at what had occurred.

Hatfield, guessing that Doone would be wary of him, after the way Robertson had behaved, had told Marshal Keith his identity. He thought that Keith might let the cat out of the bag, but since Doone by this time must have realized that he was, at the least, a special range detective, it could do no harm for Doone to know he was a Texas Ranger.

"Rest is what we need, Goldy," he murmured. Dismounting, he took the damp saddle from his mount's warm back. "After dark we go back and see how things stand."

After sundown, he rose, and had a cold meal. Heading back into Finlay, he found the settlement to be quiet.

Oberlin and the other ranchers were still in town. They had taken over the Grand Central, which had rooms to rent, and Hatfield saw armed cowboys lounging outside, and more guards in Tin Can Alley and at the side entrance. Oberlin was taking no chances of an attack by the miners, even though he had seen them leave Finlay, led by Dutch Kratz, many hours before.

The mine was dark, utterly deserted, boarded up. There was a light on in Gig Doone's home, but after Hatfield spent an hour stalking into position and spying, Doone was still alone, feet up on a table, reading a newspaper and smoking cigarettes, chain fashion. Nobody came near the chemist's.

Ernie Ulman's place was unlighted. Either he had turned in or had gone out, but Hatfield was unable to find the shaky little mine manager around the settlement.

"I can break that hombre," he thought, "when the time comes. He ain't got the nerve to hold out long."

Yes, Ulman would talk, if properly softened.

Hatfield returned to the sorrel and put him up at a corral. He retired to a loft from which he could observe the rear entrance of the Grand Central and the pacings of the alert sentinels set by Phil Oberlin. The ranchers knew that the closing of the mine might infuriate the gang, and there had never been any love lost between cowmen and miners.

He turned over in his mind what he had. He needed iron-clad evidence against Gig Doone and Kratz and the rest, to bring them to book. So far he had discovered a good deal about Doone but it was chiefly deduction or in his own mind. He was not certain yet just exactly what Doone was working toward.

He might have arrested Dutch Kratz and some of his strong-arm men, but this would probably send Doone running for cover, and it was Doone, particularly, that he was after. He was a keen judge of character and believed that the explosives man was the main instigator of all the trouble which had come upon the district.

Unless he jumped in and shot up all those he suspected, in cold blood, they would be able to beat any charges he could as yet bring against them. There were plenty of lying witnesses who would testify for Kratz and such. It was against Hatfield's nature and contrary to the law of the Rangers to strike without proof.

He spent the night watching. Twice he slipped out and went around to Doone's. The second time, he saw Doone blow out his lamp, and smoke a final cigarette, lying in his bunk after turning in.

"Huh!" the Ranger thought, as he silently retreated, "I sort of had a hunch he'd make a stab at blowin' up the Grand Central with Oberlin and all them cowmen in it! It might do the trick for him, but he's lettin' the chance slide! On the other hand, he may be too slick to try. It would be a slim gamble, with them guards outside."

In order to make an effective job of blowing up and killing Oberlin and the other ranchers, Doone would have to plant several good-sized time-bombs carefully. That took time and opportunity, and if caught in the act, the guilty party would be ruined.

The cool dawn came up without any attack having been made. Hatfield saw the cowboy guard being changed, but Doone made no move.

On the hill, at the coal mine, fresh pine timbers had been set upright, and cross planks nailed over them. Padlocks had been snapped on the office and barracks doors, and no one stirred there. Kratz and his bully boys had withdrawn to the hills, while those miners who were not of the clique had been paid off and were at the station, with their packs, awaiting the arrival of the single daily train that would run them south.

Hatfield slipped out, saddled Goldy, and left Finlay by the back street. He felt letdown. Was Doone going to take his utter defeat without a struggle?

"If he don't move I'll have to prod him," he mused. "Can't leave a sidewinder like him loose."

Dropping away from Finlay, he heard the approaching train chugging up the rise toward the last stop. He turned aside, intending to keep out of sight. Hitting a mesquite-clad ridge, he could see for some distance across the rolling range.

The light was coming up. A spot of dust, on his left hand and some miles away as yet, took his expert eye.

"Rider," he muttered. "And more behind him—two, no three, and comin' like the Pony Express."

The speed of the dust and the way it rolled told him a great deal.

He dismounted, standing at the sorrel's head and observing the chase—for that was what it turned out to be. A lone horseman was tearing along clinging like a plaster to his lathered chestnut mustang, as he quirted up the line toward Finlay, cutting across country. Three men, strung out, were after him.

The Ranger moved down behind an outcropping ridge, so as to cut the line of flight. The rider surged up, and Hatfield recognized him as one of Oberlin's Dotted Circle cowboys, a fellow he had seen at the ranch. Blood stained all one side of the young man's face, and he clung to his mustang's mane.

"He's hurt!" discovered the startled Hatfield. He could now make out the Dotted Circle brand on the chestnut. "I remember his handle now—it's Lanky Meadows."

"Lanky" Meadows was young, like most cowboys who performed his kind of strenuous work, and a hardened athlete. He was in a bad way now, though, gasping with open mouth for wind, his eyes wide. His chaps were ripped and his blue shirt was plastered to his ribs with sweat. His Stetson was held on by the chinstrap, but it had been knocked back and to one side, and the Ranger saw a gaping hole in the high crown.

Meadows was hurt and near the end of his tether. And as he glanced back again at his pursuers, Hatfield caught the gleam of the youth's clenched teeth through which the breath rasped.

As Hatfield got ready for action, the closest of Meadows' harriers threw a short-barreled rifle to shoulder and emptied the magazine as fast as he could shoot, aiming low at the rushing chestnut. Meadows' mustang gave a sudden leap into the air, and shrieked. Instinctively, Lanky disengaged his feet from the tapped stirrups, and was flung clear as the chestnut crashed dead, sliding and rolling. Meadows sailed through the air and hit on his shoulders. Then his head banged and he quivered and lay still. With a whoop of triumph, the man with the carbine tore in to make his kill.

"Panhandle Tate's men!" the Ranger muttered angrily.

The fellow's cry of victory was cut short by Hatfield's hasty slug. It came close to the swift-moving rider, who was boring in to pour bullets into the unconscious Lanky Meadows. Aware of Hatfield's threat, the rustler turned, snarling, flinging away his carbine to whip a Colt from his holster. Hatfield's second one hit him between the eyes and he sagged, his horse swerving, and left his saddle, to be dragged for a hundred yards.

The other two hastily reined in, clouds of dust whipping up under their horses' sliding hoofs. They were still some distance off. Seeing the tall Ranger, and knowing him from a previous encounter, they let go with curses and long shots, the lead kicking up dirt around the moving Hatfield. His replies forced them to turn and gallop off. They went as fast as they had come and dropped south beyond the next crest.

Hatfield bent over Lanky Meadows. The blood on the cowboy's lean, tanned face came from a flesh tear in his cheek. He was bruised from the fall he had taken, but outside of that he seemed only stunned. For several minutes, Hatfield worked over him with his canteen of water and skill at first-aid, and then Lanky looked up, swearing.

"Who—what. . . Oh, yuh're—"

"Jim, Lanky. Yuh're all right. Tate's men have gone."

"Gimme a drink—pronto!" Meadows tried to get up. "I got to find the boss. Help me on my hoss—"

"They killed him, Lanky. What's up?"

"Rustlers! And by Jupiter, you savvy who it is! Panhandle Tate and his crew! Rob Olliphant and me couldn't believe our eyes. But Tate's been stealin' our beef, doublecrossin' his friends."

Hatfield nodded. "Yore boss savvies it, Lanky. Bert Webb and me tangled with Tate and some of his boys the other night, and I fetched the warnin' to Oberlin."

"Bueno." There was satisfaction in Lanky's tone. Then he went on: "Yuh see, it was like this: Rob Olliphant and me are ridin' the line south of the crik, see? Spotted a big lot of dust and rode over. Tate had cleaned the range of our best stuff and was drivin' south, right in the open, lickety-split. If he makes the Border, we're licked, never get it back. Tate bein' a rancher, Rob and me didn't savvy at first, and Rob rode right in amongst 'em. They—they killed pore Rob, but I was lucky and broke clear. Tate drove on but he sent them three sidewinders to catch me and finish me. I'd be dead if it wasn't for you, Jim."

"Take it easy, Lanky," Hatfield advised. "We'll ride double to town."

The sorrel carried them the short run to Finlay. Phil Oberlin and several of his

rancher companions were just sitting down to breakfast at Beefsteak Bill's, a restaurant two doors from the Grand Central, when Hatfield and Meadows entered.

CHAPTER XV.

RUSTLER TRAIL.

LANKY MEADOWS' report brought Oberlin to his feet, and all thoughts of the meal fled from the cowmen's minds. In dealing with range marauders, out-and-out thieves, there could be no hesitation, and Oberlin acted with precision and speed.

"Order yore men to saddle up, boys!" he bellowed. "Get every man yuh can, and we'll start now. We can't afford to lose them cattle."

A waitress came in, carrying a plate of ham and eggs, and stared in consternation as her customers began disappearing through the door.

"Who's going to eat this?" she demanded.

"I will," Lanky Meadows said. "I'm starved to death."

Oberlin slapped Meadows on the back.

"Go to it, boy. You stick here, and rest and tank up. Yuh've more'n done yore part and yuh're plumb wore out. Good work."

"Yuh can thank Jim," Lanky said flatly.

"Yeah, Jim, we're obliged. That letter Rita sent told me how yuh saved Webb and smelled out Tate." He started out the door, Hatfield with him. "We meant to deal next with Tate, after we was finished with the mine, but he stole a march on us."

Hatfield strolled to the Grand Central with the big rancher chief.

"I reckon I'll go along, Oberlin. Tate's hooked—"

He stopped short, for he had seen a familiar figure down Tin Can Alley. Gig Doone, walking rapidly. But he was in sight for just a moment as he passed a gap between buildings.

"Tate's hooked up here with a passel of devils who've caused yuh tall trouble," Hatfield went on. "I mean Doone, Ulman and their gang."

They swung the corner, as Oberlin headed to pick up his horse at the Grand Central corral. The rancher chief turned his head to stare straight into Hatfield's gray-green eyes.

"Jim," he said, "yuh've bin a help, a big help. Now, who in thunderation are yuh? Robertson says yuh're all wool and a yard wide, and that he sent yuh out here, but he was holdin' somethin' back. Yuh throwed in with us ranchers, but if yuh don't want to say—"

He stopped, his gaze dropping. Hatfield had reached inside his shirt and extracted from its secret pocket the silver star on silver circle, emblem of the Texas Rangers. It was cupped in his long-fingered hand, and Oberlin whistled as he recognized it.

"A Ranger! That explains it."

"Yeah. Yuh might as well know. Gig Doone does."

A cowboy was saddling up a great gray stallion, Oberlin's mount. Men were slipping hulls on mustangs, checking pistols and guns.

"Plenty of ammunition, boys!" sang out Oberlin. "Tate's got thirty-five or forty killers with him, Lanky Meadows says."

As Oberlin mounted, and the Ranger was ready with Goldy, somebody began yelling to them from the main road, and they swung up that way.

"Pronto, Boss, pronto—this way!"

"What's up?" shouted Oberlin, as one of his men signaled him.

"Somethin's hit pore Lanky Meadows!" cried the cowboy.

They hurried back to the restaurant. Meadows lay on the floor, doubled up. His body was still warm, but his tongue stuck out, and his eyes bulged unseeingly. Hatfield and Oberlin stared down at him.

"Pizened, Oberlin!" the Ranger growled.

"What—how the devil—" stammered the rancher.

Hatfield could detect the odor of bitter almonds. He sniffed at the big platter of ham-and-eggs on the table. It came from that, too.

"Yore meal was sprinkled with cyanide, Oberlin," he said grimly. "Lanky got it instead of the rest of yuh!"

He gathered up the tablecloth, with all it contained, and carried it out to the kitchen. A busy Negro cook was at the stove. When he finished preparing a dish, he would place it on a table, his back to it as he worked. Close to the table was an open window which gave out on Tin Can Alley.

"Doone tried for Oberlin, after all, cuss him!" Hatfield's teeth gritted. "I saw him slippin' away after he done it! A pizener, too!"

A chemist such as Doone would have no trouble in obtaining cyanide. In fact,

the deadly poison was sometimes used to rid the range of "varmints" such as cougars or lobo wolves, by salting a bait carcass. A bit the size of a sugar grain would kill a man within seconds.

Hatfield ordered the whole mess from the table burned, and hurrying out, mounted the sorrel and rode the line to Doone's. But the explosives expert was not at his home.

"Hidin', I reckon," thought the Ranger. "I'll tend to him when we get back."

He must help the ranchers, save what cattle he could for them, and destroy Tate, an ally of Doone's. If Doone ran away, he would trail him, bring him to book. If not, he would be here when Doone returned.

The cowmen had already started, and were streaming south out of Finlay. This was the kind of work they could do to perfection—fight against an enemy in the open. Hardened Texans, men of the range, were honing for a scrap. They had been losing to the rustlers steadily, and were irritated by previous failure to contact the thieves. The fact that Panhandle Tate was leader of the guilty men made it worse. He had pulled the wool over their eyes and used his inside information to avoid pursuit, was a traitor to his kind.

Hatfield overtook them and, fully in Oberlin's confidence, rode at the head of the band, half a hundred cowboys and their bosses. They talked as they moved onward.

"Yeah," said Hatfield, replying to Oberlin's query, "Robertson sent me to pose as new mine manager. The feller he hired before me never got here or if he did, Doone and Ulman and Tate finished him off without any word comin' back to Austin."

Oberlin shook his massive, tow-haired head, his frosty brows knitted.

"I still don't savvy it all, Ranger. What're they after? That coal mine don't pay enough to justify all this killin' and fightin', does it? Specially with so many to take care of—Ulman and Kratz and their gunnies and all."

"Yuh're right," agreed the Ranger. "Robertson made a good livin' from it, after expenses were all paid, but after Ulman and Doone started, of course, he lost his shirt. There's other angles I got to straighten out, too. I've been wonderin' why so many of yore steers have died."

Oberlin shrugged. "Dirt from the mine, I guess."

"Well, I never met a steer that a little dirt would hurt. However, mebbe yuh're right. Polluted water ain't good for any critter."

"Yuh figger Doone might've pizened the crik?"

"I can't say. It's a big order to ruin a whole stream for several miles. Take an awful lot of stuff to do it."

But they had to settle down to riding. Panhandle Tate was out ahead, pushing the stolen cows for all he was worth. Some range cattle could travel nearly as fast as horsemen, but the Ranger and Oberlin hoped for a tangle to delay them so they might catch up. It was not unusual to have to stop on a run with beeves and regroup them.

Some miles south, keeping on the road to make time, Hatfield waved to the west.

"That's where Tate had his hidden depot," he explained. "I'll take a run over, and catch up with yuh soon as I can."

"Yuh want any help?" asked Oberlin, but the Ranger shook his head.

"I don't reckon so. I'm just checkin'. I doubt if Tate left anything around it."

He was right. The site of the shack was deserted.

Returning across the single railroad track, Hatfield soon overtook the rear guard of the ranchers, for the faster horses had to move at a pace accommodated to that of the slowest.

It was late in the afternoon when the Ranger, out ahead, picked up the trail of the thieves. So far they had come straight south, sure that Tate would head for the Border. Alongside the beaten trail they discovered broken bushes, and the imprints of hoofs in soft spots.

Hatfield drew up, signaling back what he had found.

There remained about two hours more of daylight, and as they eagerly took up the chase, with hot sign to follow, the sun dropped swiftly to the rugged mountain chain at their right. After another hour's riding, Hatfield topped a long rise. To the right was the railroad, running in a cut, with the mountains receding.

Ahead the road was deserted, a hard-beaten, dry way. Left, the range was somewhat broken, and low hills and buttes showed, with mesquite on the crests and cactus growths in the draws.

As Hatfield saw the cattle trail swing off, up the broken slope, a bullet whined past his head, and he stared up the hill, seeing

several mounted men there. One of them had sighted on him with a carbine, tried for him at long range.

"There they are!" roared Phil Oberlin. Hurriedly he unshipped his rifle and threw it to shoulder. "Our cows are up there, too!"

Half a mile farther on to the south-east a bunch of steers that had been turned off the road to the Border were being urged on by two more of the crew. They were Tate's men, evidently the rear guard. A clear trail of cut-up hoofs swung into the hills. With yelps of joy at having overtaken the foe, the ranchers and their cowboys surged from the road and roared up the slope, shooting and shouting challenges to the rustlers.

The long-loopers turned, retreating, but shooting back at long range.

They soon deserted the hundred steers they had been driving, and rode around them, seeking to escape. Hatfield, swept up in the enthusiasm of the moment, kept going for a couple of miles, with the well-mounted rustlers staying ahead, firing now and then.

But the Ranger began to cool off then. It was nearly dark. In a short while the sun would drop behind the mountains, and—

He slowed, hunting for sign.

"Ain't enough of 'em," he decided.

He rode to a nearby rise, seeking to see far ahead, hunting for the main party of the enemy. Suspicion flooded through him.

"They've turned us off," he muttered.

Picking up speed, he managed to overtake and slow Phil Oberlin, who was in the van.

"Oberlin," he said, "if yuh ask me, we're bein' led the way a fox leads a pack of hounds away from his den! This ain't the main bunch at all, or even their rear guard. I'll bet yuh a thousand to one Panhandle Tate's hours south of us and headed straight for the Border!"

"Yuh reckon so?" exclaimed Oberlin. "Why, if that's so, we've lost, Ranger. It's nearly dark and we'll be lucky to catch some of them rapscallions we see ahead!"

"Give me some men and I'll play my hunch," Hatfield told him.

Oberlin nodded and swerved. Ten minutes later, Hatfield was galloping south and bearing back toward the main road, with twenty fighters at Goldy's heels.

The night fell upon them suddenly, but the Ranger kept going, finally cutting onto the beaten road. He paused to give the horses a breathing spell. Then he spread his poncho, and with a hidden candle flame, hunted the softer shoulders of the road for sign.

"They come through, no doubt of it," he finally announced. "Let's go."

Doggedly pressing on, they saw the lightening of the eastern sky, on their left. A train was puffing up from the south toward its end-of-the-line at Finlay. Its lights showed as the snakelike monster rattled along the single track.

Panhandle Tate had cleverly hidden his turnoff, brushing out the marks left by the moving cattle for some hundreds of yards, and having the half dozen rustlers Oberlin had chased lead the pursuers in the wrong direction.

But now Hatfield was on the right scent. As dawn came up, and the weary, lathered horses were running with drooping heads, he saw the cut-up edges of the road, where the stolen herds had stepped.

"Not an hour ahead, boys," he declared. "We'll be up with 'em 'fore noon."

"Hosses are near done in," growled Red Pete Roland, who had accompanied the Ranger.

"They got to last," said Hatfield. "Tate and his hosses and them steers too, must be as wore out as we are."

CHAPTER XVI.

At the Dotted Circle.

YELLOWING in the sky, the sun rose. The Ranger passed a lean, long-horned cow, lying at the side of the road. She was heaving, near death from exhaustion.

"Run to a frazzle!" he muttered.

It was close to eleven o'clock when he topped a rise and in the valley before him saw the strung-out main herd below.

"There they are!" he growled, and waved the signal to the following cowmen.

Panhandle Tate had twenty-five drovers, his own cowboys and hirelings, running with him. Tate himself was riding the drag with several men, while flankers rode out from both sides of the trotting, bellowing herd, dust-covered, plastered with lather.

The Ranger tore on, and Tate saw him coming as he glanced back—the thunder of hoofs had drowned sounds. To Tate, Hatfield was apparently alone, for the ranchers had not yet hit the rise behind him.

Tate whipped his black horse around, pointing, pulling a carbine from its ready boot-sling. He brought it to shoulder, and tried for the Ranger.

Hatfield opened fire. Tate stood his ground. Some of the nearer flankers, seeing what was going on, turned and rode to help the chief rustler. Then Tate realized his error, as Red Pete Roland and several of his fighters came in sight and thundered in.

Bullets whistled about Hatfield's ears as he sped on. He was firing his Colts, and one evidently bit Tate, for the rustler nearly jumped from his saddle, and dropped his carbine. More and more cowmen were streaming over the rise, and the rustlers, stringing out, shot at them wildly.

"Run to a frazzle!" he muttered.

Panhandle Tate jerked his rein, beating down his frightened mustang with his fist. He was wounded, and rattled. He as well as the rest of the rustlers knew now that they could not hope to hold the herd. There were too many cowmen coming. Escape was in order, and the gang split up, riding in all directions.

Hatfield wanted Tate. He swerved, sticking on the bowlegged killer's trail, saving his bullets. Tate rode well for a time, but finally began to falter. Both the sorrel and Tate's black were worn, but the powerful gelding under the Ranger had the reserve stamina that counted.

"Throw up yore paws and quit, Tate!" shouted Hatfield, as he rattled down a rocky slope, within a hundred yards of the man.

Tate's eyes were bloodshot. Beard stubbled his dirty cheeks. He mouthed curses at the man who had caught up with him, and; carbine empty, threw it away and drew a Colt. As he raised it, the Ranger, who was rapidly drawing up, let go. Tate threw up both hands, flexed back, and pitched off the stampeding black.

Tate was dead, for Ranger lead had drilled under his shoulder-blade to the heart.

Red Pete Roland and his men had dueled it out with several rustlers, but most of the long-loopers had surrendered and were being collected, sullen-faced devils, in a bunch.

"We got our cows," chortled Roland. "Another night and they'd have been gone forever!"

"I reckon," drawled Hatfield, "now that this is settled, I'll be gettin' back to Finlay. I got unfinished business there. . . ."

While Hatfield, with Phil Oberlin in charge of the ranchers, had been chasing Panhandle Tate and his rustlers, everything for the time being had been going swimmingly at Oberlin's Dotted Circle Ranch. He had left his niece, Rita, in charge. Although, since most of the outfit's cowboys, as well as the neighboring ranchers and their cowhands had gone with the chase, the Dotted Circle had been left with only a skeleton force.

To help Rita, there were only Bert Webb, a few line riders who were out most of the time, the Negro cook, and an old wrangler named "Whiffy" who was at least ninety. They expected Phil Oberlin and the men to return shortly.

Bert Webb was, in fact, Rita's main standby. He had rested up after his narrow escape from death at the hands of Panhandle Tate and his rustler crew, and the subsequent hard ride with Jim Hatfield. His strength and youth had quickly restored him, and he was none the worse for what he had been through.

That bright morning, fragrant with the aromatic odors of sage and mesquite, Lanky Meadows and Rob Olliphant had eaten their breakfasts and saddled up at the crack of dawn, and had started out on patrol. Two other riders headed northeast, in the other direction, to check on the cattle.

The steers were the life-blood of the ranch, the reason for everything. Around the raising of the beef was built the complicated and romantic calling of the cowboy, with his colorful ways and feudal habit of intense loyalty to the rancher who hired him.

Bert Webb had a youth's ability to learn quickly, and he was naturally clever. He was rapidly acquiring the needed skills, although it took time to become a master bronc buster and trained cowhand. However, he was gladly serving his apprenticeship, and the rough school he was in was softened by Rita Oberlin's personal interest. Born and bred on the range, the girl knew all the lore of riding, roping and handling cattle, and she did her best to teach her pupil.

Handling a forty-foot rawhide lariat, to throw it correctly and drop the loop over a fifteen-hundred-pound steer, charging at breakneck speed and able to turn on a two-bit piece, took a lot of practice. Webb, by dint of constant work, was at the point where he could capture a fence post and was beginning to try his newly acquired tricks on the calves in a nearby corral.

Sitting on the top rail of the fence, Rita smilingly coached him, watching as he made cast after cast, and recoiled the rope.

"You've got to develop special muscles for it in your wrist and forearm, Bert," the girl told him. "But you're doing fine."

"How long yuh reckon it'll be?" he asked.

"Oh, in a year or maybe two you'll be able to hold a cow—that is, if it isn't too heavy."

Webb blinked, and she laughed at him.

"Don't worry. It'll come to you if you keep working, Bert. Let's go see if the cook has dinner ready. I'm starved."

Webb enjoyed best the swift runs over the rolling rangeland, trying to keep up with Rita. She was a magnificent rider and seldom mounted a tame horse, preferring the half-wild mustangs. Webb himself had been thrown several times by range animals whose sudden changes of direction and speed had fooled him. He now was half-way between a tame horse and a bucker, and learning fast.

They went out that afternoon, north from the ranch house and buildings. To the left, in the distance, loomed the mountains, while in all other directions the rolling, rocky range, the cattle land with its coarse, nutritious bunch grasses, surrounded them. In the draws were cactus growths, while mesquite, bane of the rancher since it killed out grass, commanded the ridges.

"Come on," ordered Rita. "There's an old cow over there with a calf. I want to show you how to cut one out. Be careful, now. The mother will charge us if she gets a chance."

Her slim body seemed to be part of the mettled paint horse under her. The mustang's ears were back and his nostrils distended. He had plenty of spirit. Rita leaned this way, then that way, with the animal's quick movements. Webb followed along on a lanky black whose disposition was better than that of his fellows.

Rita had a lariat made of softened rawhide, a present from one of the older cowboys. Many hours of work had gone into making the beautiful rope.

The paint horse knew what was desired. He was a trained cowpony and, after blocking off the mother and separating her from the calf, Rita looped the calf. The cow bellowed and put down her head, charging blindly. Webb's black turned her and held her attention without waiting to be told, and as the calf fell, blatting, and the cow vocally threatened them, Rita leaned down, disengaged the loop, then turned and sped away. She was showing Webb technique and balance.

"I brought these two ponies today because they know something about working in a herd," she explained. "They've had some training although they're not A-one at it. A cowpuncher usually has a favorite horse he saves for cutting-out and herd work. There are animals for straight riding, for night herding and other uses, Bert."

Webb watched her with bated breath as they slowed, the mustangs climbing a long slope. Reaching the summit, they could look about for miles on the lovely range, rolling off in all directions with the mountains on the west.

Rita was laughing in sheer joy of life, her white teeth gleaming. The warm breeze whipped at her golden hair, pinned under her Stetson. The waves caught the sunlight, glinting. Her eyes were bright and very much alive, and the exercise had brought a healthy glow to her cheeks.

"You're the most beautiful thing in the world!" Bert Webb said suddenly.

"What?" she said, turning in her saddle. The smile left her lips.

Webb flushed, confused. He hadn't realized that he had spoken aloud.

"I—I—that is—"

The black was close to the paint horse. Drawn by irresistible forces, Webb seized Rita's hand and crushed it in his.

"Rita—Rita!" he murmured. "I love yuh!"

He leaned over swiftly and pressed his lips to hers.

At that instant the mettlesome paint horse, objecting to the contact of the black's ribs and Webb's saddle, swung his head and bit at the black, jumping around. Webb nearly fell out of his saddle, saving himself by seizing the horse's mane.

Rita laughed, and Webb joined in, at his own expense. He was appalled at his own temerity in kissing this girl. She was heiress to a great domain, and he was not even worth a cowboy's wages as yet. He was relieved that she wasn't angry with him.

"Rita," he blurted, "will yuh marry me?"

She grew serious again. She shook her head, and Webb's heart dropped, his face growing long and woebegone. He seemed to have crashed hard, jolted back to a realization of life.

"Don't take it that way, Bert," Rita begged. "I—I always expected to marry a cowman, you see."

"I'm goin' to be one," he said eagerly. "Would there be a chance for me?"

"Yes, Bert," she said, with a candid flash of her eyes at him, "there sure would."

She pulled her reins and her mustang started trotting down the other side of the hill. Webb took out after her. The girl rode swiftly, looking straight ahead. That kiss had changed things between them.

That evening they sat together on the veranda, watching a slice of moon come up in the sky. Rita let Bert Webb hold her hand, and when he said good night, she let him kiss her again. And this time there was no skittish horse to break them apart.

"I'll marry you, Bert—one of these days," she whispered, and then she turned and went inside.

CHAPTER XVII.

Night of Horror.

Entirely unable to believe his good fortune, and in a roseate glow, Bert Webb reached the bunkhouse. It was dark. A couple of line riders had come back, but Rob Olliphant and Lanky Meadows had not returned. Sometimes such cowboys were out too far to get in, and camped overnight.

Webb turned in without lighting the candle on the table, and was quickly asleep, joy in his heart.

He awoke with a nightmare jolt. His blinking eyes saw that the door was open. Through it he could glimpse a patch of sky and a few stars. A frightened voice, that of the cook, spoke, and Webb jumped.

"Who's dat?" demanded the quavery Negro voice.

"It's me, Sam," replied Webb.

"Mistuh Webb—yuh heah what I heah?"

"What?" demanded Webb.

"I hear Mis' Rita screech like an owl."

"Huh? You fool, why didn't yuh say so?"

Webb left his bunk in one leap, grabbing up his Colt revolver which hung by his head.

"Look out, theah's somebuddy at the doah!" warned Sam.

Webb started for the exit. Then he sighted the dark figures standing at one side, toward the house. The faint light shone on the barrels of shotguns. The two line riders were awake now.

"C'mon, boys!" Webb called softly. "There's trouble at the house!"

He was not sure of that, at first. For a moment he had believed it might be the Dotted Circle back from town.

Then he heard a frantic cry, a call for help, from the house. It was Rita.

"Who's there?" demanded Webb, gun up.

He could not open fire without warning. The men he saw might be friends. Then, one of the silent men outside raised a gun.

"Stay where yuh are, cowboy," he ordered, "or we'll blast yuh."

Then from the house came a hoarse, angry bellow, a man cursing in pain and rage.

"That sounds like—" gasped Webb.

He jumped closer to the door and sent a shot out at the group near the bunkhouse. A shotgun belched at him and he felt the menacing whoosh of buckshot, as yet unscattered. If he ran out, he would be riddled, blown wide open!

The two cowboys, Colts in hand, were leaping to join him.

"Out the back winder!" whispered Webb frantically.

There was a small opening there. Webb rushed to it, and peeked out. A man was standing near it, at the corner of the bunkhouse. Webb shoved out his head and shoulders and fired. The fellow swore and staggered around the turn. Webb dived out, rolling on his shoulders, and coming up, gun in hand.

He started for the main house, and bullets hunted him in the night, but he ran with the speed of desperation, reaching the back entry unhurt. Behind him the cowboys were dueling with the gunnies, but his one idea was to reach Rita.

Crashing inside, he stumbled over a chair, went on through to the front of the house. Rita's bedroom door was shut. He opened it, calling to her.

He got no answer. The room was empty.

But the window was wide open, and low, only three feet above the ground at its base. A chair was tipped over between the bed and the window, and Webb knew at once that Rita had been taken out that way. He followed, hit the dirt, then tried to pull himself together, because he was frantic and realized he was acting like a fool.

There were some shots from the rear of the place, and the sound of receding hoofs.

"Diamond A—this way!" he called.

He connected with the two line riders and the cowboys had trailed after him to the

house. One had a bleeding arm, a cut from a slug. The assailants had retreated under their fire, or perhaps because their job was done. They were riding off, north. Webb heard them as they pushed their mustangs away from the ranch.

"They're—they've taken Rita with 'em, boys!" shouted Webb. "Fetch a light."

As one of the cursing cowboys hurried to get a lantern, Webb rushed around the house, but there was no sign of the girl nor of the enemy.

By the rays of the lantern brought to him, Webb examined the ground under Rita's window. It was soft near the foundation and there were two heel marks, not his own, in the earth. He stared at them—large indentations as a man had landed hard, his weight on his heels. There was a faint X, made by nails, that Webb could read in the tracks.

"Saddle up!" he cried. "C'mon, we got to catch 'em."

He and the line riders were in leather within five minutes. The men who had carried Rita Oberlin off had ridden north from the ranch, and the trio headed after them, blindly, in the night.

"By thunder," exclaimed "Ginger" Phelps, the young rider who had been wounded, "there they are, Webb!"

On a moonlit slope before them they saw several horsemen, slowing climbing. With a whoop, Webb and the other two Diamond A men attacked, guns blaring. The enemy shot back, and retreated. Dimly Webb could see the riders before them, but the shadows were deep.

Heavy volleys of lead threatened to finish off Webb and the two men with him. Doggedly they stuck on the trail, however, and mile after mile rolled out under the mustang hoofs.

They were far to the north of the Dotted Circle when the gray drawn broke, and the foe made a stand in some rocky outcroppings. They outnumbered the Diamond A four to one. As the light grew, Webb was hanging to one side at a distance, intending to keep them under surveillance, while the three of them eagerly looked for signs of Rita Oberlin.

"She ain't with 'em, Webb," growled Phelps.

"No, by the eternal, she ain't!"

They could see well enough now to realize that the men they had come after had led them off, and that the girl must have been spirited away in another direction.

"C'mon, then," Webb said dully.

He swung his horse and galloped back toward the ranch, horror and desperation in his heart.

"We've got to get fresh hosses and get to Finlay for help pronto," Webb said, when they swung into the ranch yard.

Without even waiting to snatch a bite of breakfast, Bert Webb cut a fresh mount out of the corral and headed for Finlay, praying as he rode that the man he knew as Jim Hathaway, a man on whom he knew he could rely, would be there.

Jim Hathaway, or rather Jim Hatfield, however, was not in Finlay town, but he did return from the successful chase of Pan-handle Tate's rustlers late that evening, long after Bert Webb had ridden away from the town with Marshal Keith and a posse—of which the big Ranger knew nothing.

Hatfield leisurely changed his trail-dusty clothing and freshened up, and when he finally stepped from the hotel he wore a red flannel shirt, levis and leather chaps—and his badge was pinned on his powerful chest, fastened on the pocket of his shirt.

The sun was sinking behind the rugged mountains, and long shadows lay over the settlement. The coal mine, which had animated the place, lay dismally boarded up.

Hatfield was thirsty after he had tended the sorrel and cleaned up himself, so dropped in at the Grand Central for a drink. He was a little surprised that the saloon was deserted, except for the bartender, but made no comment.

Hatfield had his drink, then picked up a week-old newspaper and dropped down in a chair near the bar. He rolled a cigarette and lighted it, settling back comfortably.

He had not been there more than a few minutes when he grew conscious that someone was lurking outside the batwing doors. A warning of danger swept over him. With the newspaper held in front of him so that it shielded his actions from the man outside, he drew the gun in the holster on his right hip.

"Shore had a warm day," the bartender commented languidly.

"Yeah—and it's gettin' warmer," drawled Hatfield, and instantly, with the words, he dropped down on one knee as a bullet sent by the man in the doorway tore through the top edge of Hatfield's newspaper.

The lighted cigarette dropped from the Ranger's lips to the floor. The Colt in his

right hand roared—and the man outside the swinging-doors dropped as the slug tore into his body.

"Blazes, but yuh're fast!" The bartender stared at Hatfield in wide-eyed wonder.

The Ranger stalked to the batwings, stepped through them, and looked down at the dead man. He knew the fellow by sight—one of Panhandle Tate's gang who had not been with the rustled cows, but Hatfield did not know the man's name.

He picked up the corpse and carried it into the Grand Central to a back room, where he left it.

"He tried to kill yuh, Ranger!" exploded the barkeeper. "I seen it all!"

Hatfield nodded, and had started to make a reply when he heard riders coming in along Main Street. A quick glance through the window showed him twenty men, riding behind Marshal Tuffy Keith, at whose side

was Bert Webb, pushing lathered horses up to the hitch-rack. They slid out of their saddles, and had started for the saloon but halted as Jim Hatfield stepped outside.

"Webb!" the Ranger called.

He was astounded at the change in Webb's face. It was ashen and drawn, and there were dark rings under the young fellow's eyes.

"What's wrong?" Hatfield demanded.

"Jim!" Webb seized his hand. "They—they got Rita! Took her from the ranch last night. Me and the two boys left there, chased after the men we thought had her, but they didn't. When we got back to the ranch and couldn't find out anything more, I come lickety-split to town for help. The marshal organized a posse and we rode up to a place we thought she might be, but she ain't there."

"Where?" demanded Hatfield.

"Silver Springs—back in the mountains."

Marshal Keith came to join them, his honest face sweated and discouraged.

"Howdy, Ranger," he greeted soberly. "This is mighty bad, ain't it? Soon as Webb come to me I got up a posse and started for that camp. But them miners that are up there now swear they ain't seen Kratz or the girl."

Hatfield grasped what had occurred. "You mean that Kratz snatched Miss Oberlin?" he growled, and an icy fury flooded his veins. "How did yuh savvy it was Dutch, Webb?"

"I *know* it was!" cried Bert. "I heard his voice, and I saw a couple of heel marks under her winder. Kratz wears a cross in his boot heels to keep the devil away. Some of his men led us the wrong way in the dark, while Kratz run her off."

The whole story came out, Hatfield picking it up thread by thread.

"Doone's behind this," he muttered.

"I done the best I could, Ranger," apologized the marshal.

Hatfield nodded. "How many of Kratz' men were at Silver Springs when yuh was there?"

"We counted fifteen or twenty," replied Webb.

"Huh. He has as many more, I reckon." To Tuffy Keith he said, "Bring yore boys along, Marshal."

"Where yuh headin'?"

"Up the line. Just do as I say."

Keith signaled his posse, townsmen and a few cowboys who had been in town when he had called for assistance.

The tall Ranger strode up the sidewalk, gun holsters softly rustling against his leather chaps. Behind him came the other men.

The sun dropped behind the summits of the jagged hills, and darkness settled over the town that was snuggled into the toes of the mountain.

Lights were springing up in Finlay. Hatfield glanced at Ulman's. The former mine manager's home was not lighted, and the door was closed. But someone lit a lamp in Gig Doone's place.

Hatfield approached within twenty-five yards of the Doone home, then he signaled to Tuffy Keith.

"Throw a cordon around Doone's, Marshal," he said in a low voice, "but tell yore men not to come in too close. If Doone runs out, shoot him."

"Yuh goin' in?" asked Keith.

"I'm goin' in."

"Let me go with you, Jim!" begged Bert Webb.

The somber, gray-green eyes of the Ranger darkened to the hue of a stormy Arctic sea as they rested on Webb's face for a moment. "Yuh can come if yuh like," he said, "but yuh may regret it."

Webb hurried after him as he went to Doone's front door. The Colts in their well-oiled holsters seemed ready to leap to the slim hands of the Texas Ranger. The door was unlocked, and Hatfield threw it in, looked through the shop.

CHAPTER XVIII.

BLOCKED.

DOONE was standing at his laboratory table. He glanced slowly around and gave a short nod as he recognized Hatfield.

"Come in," he said quietly.

Hatfield walked inside, paused beside the door, and leaned against the wall.

"Evenin', Doone," he drawled. "Where is she?"

"What do you mean?" asked Doone, raising his brows.

Webb started in, but the Ranger barred him with his arm, and the young fellow remained in the hall.

Hatfield sought to read the vicious face of the explosives man, Gig Doone. A cigarette curled gray smoke from Doone's lips insolently. He had his coat off, and his shirt was clean and white. His black pants had faint acid stains upon them. The Ranger could see that his yellowed fingers, touched by chemicals, did not tremble in the slightest as he leaned with his back to the table.

"Yuh savvy what I mean, Doone," Hatfield said coldly. "Yuh had Dutch Kratz kidnap Rita Oberlin last night. Yuh're goin' to tell me where she is."

Hatfield took a step forward and Doone tensed. His deep-set black eyes began to glow and the lids narrowed. His dark mustache, singed by innumerable cigarettes, bristled and the lines about his eagle nose grew taut.

Without a word being said, the two strong men dueled, and it was Hatfield whose eyes moved away first.

But it was not fear for himself which caused the Ranger to pause. It was because of Rita Oberlin. He could read criminals, and he realised Doone's unbreakable violence of nature. Doone wore no gun in sight, but that did not mean he was not ready to fight.

A slug from the Ranger's Colt would kill Doone. But it might, at the same instant, finish all chances of rescuing the girl.

"He's got it all worked out," thought Hatfield.

"No," said Doone. He kept his voice down but every word was distinct. "I don't know what yuh mean, Ranger. I haven't had anything to do with Miss Oberlin and I haven't seen Kratz since the mine was closed, thanks to you." After a moment's pause he went on in the same quiet voice, "Nitro glycerin is ticklish stuff to handle. I was just mixing some when you interrupted me. It's mighty unstable. For instance, if you stamped too hard on the floor, in this condition it could explode and blow this whole building to splinters."

"You, too, Doone."

"Yes, me, too. I savvy that."

Doone was not afraid of death, or else he knew he held all the aces. And Hatfield knew that though he had jumped to the conclusion that Doone was behind the disappearance of Rita Oberlin, he had no proof.

"Isn't Oberlin back yet?" inquired Doone, in the same quiet voice.

"No, but he's comin'."

"I'll be glad to talk to him. Mebbe I can convince him I had nothin' at all to do with his daughter's bein' taken away."

Doone shrugged, turned back to the chemicals and apparatus where he had been working.

Hatfield swung and walked out.

"Ulman!" he thought. "If he savvies, I'll scare it out of him. And he's goin' to be my chief witness agin Mister Gig Doone."

Balked because of the perilous situation Rita was in, aware that a false move might spell her death, Hatfield had to step carefully.

"A hundred to one that sidewinder is loaded with nitro," he mused. "A bullet'd blow him higher'n a kite, but everybody near would go along with it. He's shore figgerin' on winnin'."

He spoke to Marshal Keith. "Doone's in there, Marshal. Keep him where he is, but don't let any of yore men get close."

"All right, Ranger."

Webb trotted anxiously at Hatfield's heels as the tall officer crossed to Ernie Ulman's.

"Yuh reckon Doone is back of it, Jim?"

"I'll take my oath on it," Hatfield said grimly.

"Why not arrest him, then, and make him talk?"

"He ain't the kind who talks, Bert. And he ain't the kind who gets arrested, either. Doone savvies that, and he savvies we know it. We can't go after him till we find Rita. Even then, unless we have the legal evidence to convict him, he could wriggle out. However, I got an ace up my sleeve and I'm going to play it now."

Ernie Ulman was weak, Hatfield was sure. The Ranger had marked him as a man who would break, who would talk to save himself, once the pressure was on. Ulman was a nervous type, not the killer that Doone was, and much more easy to handle than such a brute as Dutch Kratz.

Ulman's house was not yet lit up. Hatfield rapped on the door, but there was no answer. The door was locked, and he stepped to a window and peered in, but the interior was black.

The Ranger put a shoulder to the door, then drew back. Two hard shoves, and the lock ripped from the flimsy dry wood and he was in. He paused to strike a match. He was in a square living room, and it was empty. There was dust on the table.

With Webb at his spurred heels, Hatfield walked through into the bedroom. Lighting up, he saw Ulman lying on the cot, stretched out, apparently asleep. He touched his match to a blackened candlewick and went over to the bed.

Behind him, Bert Webb gasped. He was staring at Ulman's face.

"He's been dead for a couple of days," growled Hatfield.

There was, he found, a faint odor of bitter almonds pervading the close little room.

"I reckon that Gig Doone savvied Ulman as well as I did!" he muttered.

His ace had been nullified by Doone's joker. "He used Ulman till he figgered he was dangerous, then slipped him the cyanide," he thought.

It was maddening. The Ranger *knew* that Doone had killed several victims, but he could not strike back because of Rita Oberlin's fate.

Shouts from down the road brought Hatfield to the open street door. In the lights that had come on, he could see riders down the line.

"Oberlin and his pards are comin' in, Webb," he said. "We'll go see Doone again."

Tuffy Keith had his men strung around the explosive man's office. Someone gave the rancher the news about Rita's disappearance, and the big Texan came riding swiftly up the road, his cowboys stringing at his heels. Slower mounts were still pouring in at the south end of town, back from the fight with Panhandle Tate's rustlers.

Webb and the Ranger cut across to meet Oberlin, whose frosty brows were drawn together until they touched one another. The big rancher's face was red, grim, in the rays of a street lantern close at hand.

"They got Rita, boss!" cried Webb, looking up at the furious cowman. "Dutch Kratz took her last night! We fought 'em and tried to foller 'em but they tricked us. Gig Doone's in on it, shore as shootin'!"

"I just heard," growled Oberlin. He patted the pearl-handled stock of his big six-shooter. "I'll talk to Doone, cuss his dirty heart and soul!"

Hatfield, with the silver star on silver circle, emblem of the Texas Rangers, shining, pressed forward.

"Take it easy, Oberlin!" he advised. "If yuh want to see yore niece agin, yuh'll keep that gun in its socket."

"What yuh mean?" snarled Oberlin. He was shocked to the core by the fact that any man would lay violent hands on a woman, and on Rita, of all women. "Doone'll talk if he savvies where she is! I'll tear it out of him. And if it's money he wants, why, I'll get it, and then—"

"Hey, Oberlin!"

The door of Doone's office had opened and in the yellow rectangle of light stood their enemy, cooly hailing the rancher.

"Why, the consarned hydrophoby skunk!" shouted Oberlin, hastily dismounting. "I'll—"

Hatfield seized his arm. "Easy, Oberlin! I tell yuh—"

Oberlin jerked away, stalking toward Doone.

"Come in, Oberlin," said Doone calmly. "I'd like to talk to yuh. That Ranger pard of yores accuses me of a terrible crime. Claims I had somethin' to do with the disappearance of yore niece. But he lies."

He backed into the laboratory as Oberlin advanced, and dropped the little gate which barred the front from the main part of the room.

Oberlin, florid face a deep brick-hue, cursed as he put a hand on the hinged two-by-four forming the gate.

"Where is she, Doone?" he shouted. "I'll blow yuh to tarnation and back if yuh don't give her up!"

Doone laughed. He took the cigarette from his lips, holding it between his stained forefinger and thumb.

"Blowin' is my specialty, Oberlin," he said. "There's a good deal of nitro-glycerin in here, and it's tricky stuff. Why, it might explode if yuh shout too loud or stamp thataway. Calm yoreself. I tell yuh, I don't know a thing about yore girl's whereabouts."

Oberlin paused, hand on the gate. Hatfield was at the rancher's side, his eyes steady on Doone.

"How's he expect to work it?" the Ranger was wondering. "Even if Oberlin does give up the mine?"

He began to find out, as Doone, having checked Oberlin's maddened rush, picked up a flask containing a white, oily liquid.

"Sulphuric acid," observed Doone. "It's nasty stuff, Oberlin. Blinds the eyes and disfigures, burns like some horrible fire built on yore flesh that can't be put out. I use a lot of it, in chemical work. A little goes into every batch of nitro, along with the glycerine and nitric acid, to absorb what water's formed. 'Vitriol,' that's the name most folks savvy it by."

Oberlin gasped. Doone had made no open threat. He was only talking, in a controlled voice, describing the properties of the concentrated acid.

But Hatfield and the rancher understood. A few ounces of the stuff, hurled into a girl's beautiful face—it was too horrible to contemplate, and the Ranger comprehended why Oberlin shuddered and seemed suddenly to lose all his strength of mind and body. The big man sagged, jaw dropping.

"Yuh—yuh wouldn't—" he whispered. "Don't say that, Doone! No—no man with a decent spark in him could do that."

"Yuh're right," agreed Doone. "But Webb and Hathaway—if that's the Ranger's handle—claim Dutch Kratz took yore niece away. That worries me, it shore does, because Dutch ain't really human when he's riled. He was in here the other day and I missed a whole flask of vitriol right after he left! He must've been plannin' this job all along."

The Ranger could tell plainly enough, now what Doone was up to.

"The dog's layin' it on Dutch," he thought, watching Doone's plan unfold.

"Yuh see, losin' the mine got Kratz mighty sore," went on Doone. He paused to light another cigarette. "Fact, he told me he wasn't goin' to take it lyin' down but I had no idea he was plannin' such a trick. It's a mean situation, 'cause if yuh hunt him and get near him, he's liable to throw that acid in yore niece's face."

"Stop it!" muttered the tortured Oberlin. "Speak straight, Doone, and tell me what yuh want."

Doone shrugged. "Can't you savvy I ain't got a thing to do with this, that I'm only tryin' to help you, Oberlin?" he answered in an injured tone. "If yuh keep insistin' I'm guilty, I wash my hands of the whole affair. I had a notion I might help yuh out, but—" He broke off, and half-turned from them.

Bert Webb was wringing his hands, blinking in agony. He was in a sweat, as was Phil Oberlin, and the cowmen who backed up their leader, waiting in the door and entry.

"What's yore idee, Doone?" begged Oberlin. "Forget what I said. I'm all worked up 'count of the gal."

CHAPTER XIX.

Red Death.

Phil Oberlin was such a fighting man that nothing else could have made him crawl. He crawled now, for Rita's sake. Hatfield could not move. He realized that Kratz must have his orders to hurl acid at Rita Oberlin if they came too close, wherever he might be holding her. The Ranger could kill Doone, but—

"She's a mighty purty girl," said Doone earnestly, "and I'd hate to see her hurt. I've been thinkin' up some way to save her from Kratz, since I heard she was missin'. Kratz is sorta touched in the head, I guess. It's the mine, and losin' it, no doubt at all. If I could show him yuh'd decided to keep runnin' it and that he'd still be boss and foreman, why, it should give us the chance to git Rita away."

"How could we do it?" Oberlin asked thickly.

"Kratz don't trust many people. It so happens he does cotton to me, because I've

been explosives man for the mine and he knows me. It's a dangerous job but I'll undertake it, for yore sake and yore niece's, Oberlin. I don't know where Dutch is, but sooner or later I'll find out, I hope. He's mighty cunnin', though, and it would have to be the real thing to fool him. If I could show him proof that the mine belonged to me, for instance, he might be tricked into passin' over the girl."

"So that's the way he figgers it," mused the Ranger.

Everything was to be blamed on Dutch Kratz, then. Perhaps Gig Doone had promised Kratz a large reward and plenty of time to escape.

"A hundred to one, though, he'll take no chances of Kratz bein' captured," decided Hatfield. "A slug or a dose of cyanide would leave Doone clear, with the title to the mine in his paws! After Rita's safe, I can arrest him and try to make my charges stick! If I shoot him down without proper evidence—"

He didn't like that. It was not his way.

"I—I don't own the coal mine," replied Oberlin, gulping. Beads of sweat stood out on his brow. "It belongs to the Association."

"That's tough luck," exclaimed Doone.

Big John Smythe, of the Cross 2, and young Tim Anson of the Chicken Wing, were in the group who had come with Oberlin.

"Phil," spoke up Smythe, "far as my part in the mine goes, it's yores to do as yuh see fit. I'm in favor of lettin' Doone try to save Rita. She's worth the range."

"That's the way I feel, too," growled Anson.

"I'll have to talk to the other boys," said Oberlin. "They ain't all back yet, Doone. Give me a couple hours, will yuh?"

"It ain't up to me, *amigo*," Doone insisted patiently. "Kratz is the one who's took her. I'll get to work and try to find where he's holdin' her. I ain't shore I can do it, mind."

Oberlin turned, eyes blind in his agonized mental torture. He stumbled over the sill and Anson caught his arm to steady him.

"If anybody follers me," called Doone, "Kratz may get excited, Oberlin. I'll do the best I can to help yuh out."

Hatfield still stood near the gate. Inside, as his eyes dropped, he had seen a reddish-black clod of dirt. It must have come, he guessed, from Doone's boots, and his gaze riveted on the killer's feet.

Gig Doone wore heavy brogans, suitable for work in rocky, muddy places, and in mines. They were stained with black coal dust and other foreign substances that coated the soles and lower sides.

"That big clod just fell off," the Ranger decided. "It must've been damp to stick thataway."

A hunch struck him, as he rapidly ran over the situation in his alert mind. Kratz would probably be holding Rita not too far away. Out in the open was dangerous, and she was not at Silver Springs. The posse had been through there. "Kratz is no demon rider, either," he thought.

He saw Doone was watching him, a derisive glint in his black eyes, and he swung and went outside. Oberlin and his rancher companions were on their way down the road to the Grand Central.

Hatfield strode after them, noticing that Bert Webb was walking at the rear of the procession of cowmen.

"Webb! C'mere! I want to see yuh."

Bert Webb was in a bad way, worried over Rita. He turned aside into a dark alleyway, with the Ranger.

"What is it, Jim? Ain't it terrible? Doone has us beat."

"Looka here, Bert," Hatfield said hastily. "We ain't got long to work. We got to beat Doone."

"Rita comes first," Webb said.

"Yeah, that's true, and I aim to see she's safe before anything else. But we can't let Doone win."

"How yuh goin' to stop him? If he's killed or arrested, Kratz must have orders to kill her or throw acid in her face," Webb shuddered. "Her eyes are the most beautiful I ever seen, Jim."

He felt the steel grip of the Ranger on his arm, and pulled himself together.

"Yuh know that coal mine back and forwards, don't yuh?" inquired Hatfield.

"Why, I savvy it purty well, though there may be some shafts I ain't been in. I worked as I was ordered, yuh see."

"Are there any other entries than the main one?"

"Oh, shore. There's half a dozen airshafts openin' on the mountainside. They're small, though."

"Big enough for a man to get through?"

"Yeah. What yuh drivin' at?"

"I want yuh to lead me down in there, right now, Bert. I got a hunch."

"Yuh—yuh reckon Kratz might have Rita down below?"

"Yuh catch on quick, don't yuh? It's possible. Kratz is right at home underground and he could dodge and get out one shaft or another if he had to. And he's close to Doone when he wants him."

"But if we go foolin' round there and Rita's really below, Kratz is likely to hurt her if he hears us."

"We can't let him spot us or hear us. C'mon! There's a side path up the slope. Quit askin' questions and we'll get to work. We'll have to carry a couple of dark-lanterns."

"The storekeeper's got some with slides on like we used in the mine," said Webb.

"We'll go after 'em. He ain't turned in yet. His light's on in back."

Webb was shaky but sought to control himself, as they obtained two small oil lamps which had metal sides to shut off the beams if desired. The two young men hurried through the shadows, and reached the railroad spur, crossing the track as it ran close to the looming wall of rock.

There was a steep path farther down, away from the mine buildings, and Webb led Hatfield up the mountain slope to a point where one of the airshafts opened out. Brush partially hid the hole, which was about four feet in diameter.

"So happens I've been through this one," whispered Webb. "It ain't too steep and leads to the main gallery."

They had to move slowly. It was pitch-black inside the confined shaft and the draft whistled in their ears, bringing dust with it that gritted the eyes. Their course led downward all the way, and they braced themselves at points to keep from sliding too fast.

Hatfield's ears rang as they descended. Webb, accustomed to mines, kept opening his mouth and swallowing, to equalize the pressure in his ears. After what seemed an interminable time, Webb straightened up, reaching to touch his big companion.

"Here we are," he breathed.

They were on the south side of the main gallery, far below the surface. The air was stale and hot, for the big adit had been boarded up. Hatfield and Webb moved carefully about the mine. Webb knew it well, and they searched its recesses, but the ghostly, tomblike vaults were empty.

"Now listen careful, Bert," Hatfield whispered, for the long passages would echo any sharp sound and if Kratz were near, he would probably catch their voices. "Have yuh ever run into any brownish-red or bright-red ore down here when yuh was workin'?"

"Huh? What kinda ore?"

"Keep yore voice down," warned Hatfield. "Stay close so we can whisper. I saw some bits on Doone's boots."

"I've seen some clays."

"These would be more like crystals."

"I don't believe so . . . Now wait! I did see somethin' one day, in the big east gallery."

"Which way? Lead me."

Webb turned and they passed through the shafts. At last they brought up against a heavy wall of planks, which shut off the end of the gallery.

"There was a slide here, 'cordin' to Dutch, and when the coal vein petered out it was shored up," breathed Webb. "Nothin' ahead but shale, and—"

He broke off, as Hatfield gripped his wrist. An instant later, Webb caught the same sound which had startled the Ranger. Someone coughed, on the other side of the wooden partition.

Hatfield's long hand fitted tight over the startled Webb's mouth. In the excitement of the moment, Bert had almost cried out.

"It's a woman—no doubt Rita," Hatfield told him, whispering close to Webb's ear. "Keep quiet."

They crouched, ear to the planks, and after a time, again caught the cough. The dust irritated the nose and throat, and Hatfield had to fight against sneezing and coughing himself.

How to get in there and seize the girl before Kratz could injure her, was Hatfield's first problem. His long hands felt silently at the barrier. The planks were nailed to uprights, but he was able to get his fingers under the bottom of the boards. The earth was rather soft, and he began to ease handfuls of it away. By touch, he told Webb what he was doing, and the young miner eagerly began to assist. It was slow work, but it was quieter than trying to smash in the heavy planks.

"Sh!" breathed the Ranger, ceasing his burrowing.

A heavy voice came to them.

"More vater you vant?" it demanded.

"Yes, please." That was Rita Oberlin's light tones. She sounded frightened.

"Some I go get," growled Dutch Kratz. "After dat, to sleep you go. Too much noise you must not make."

Faint footfalls were lost in the distance. "C'mon—use yore knife!" ordered the Ranger. "Now's our chance. He's gone for water."

They already had a good-sized hole scooped, and their knives and hands flew in the few minutes they had. Hatfield's arm broke through under the planks, and rapidly they widened the opening until a man could squeeze through.

Desperately, Hatfield pushed under the barrier, and came up in pitch-blackness on the other side. Webb made soft scratching sounds as he followed.

"Rita!" whispered the Ranger.

He felt a way along, as she did not reply, and he bumped into the wall of earth. Bits fell from the contact of his groping hands. It was a sharp turn, and Hatfield made it, close to the side.

"Who—who's that?" a startled voice said, almost at his feet.

"Ssh! That you, Rita?"

"Yes. Who is it?"

Suddenly the intense darkness was broken by a bit of light. Footfalls sounded from up the corridor.

Hatfield got ready. Dutch Kratz was coming back with the water.

The light grew, and Webb, coming up behind the Ranger, exclaimed low with joy and relief as he saw the girl. Rita was crouched on a blanket, her back to the red wall. She was as pale as a sheet, and she coughed, her eyes glowing in the faint illumination.

"Bert—Bert!" she choked brokenly.

"Rita, honey—yuh ain't hurt?"

She shook her head, but tears began to flow down her cheeks, welling from her beautiful eyes.

"Take her back through the main shaft, pronto, Webb," commanded Hatfield.

Webb lifted her. She could walk, and they hurried around the turn in the red wall, while Hatfield squatted on the blanket where the girl had been. The lantern, a miner's lamp, was in Dutch Kratz's hands, as the huge, misshapen foreman came around the next bend. The rays of light glinted with scintillating brilliance on shiny crimson crystals that mingled with the reddish-brown stuff forming the walls of the hidden shaft.

Behind him, Hatfield caught the sounds as Webb and Rita crept beneath the partition.

CHAPTER XX.

REPORT.

KRATZ must have heard something echoing in the long gallery, for he came on swiftly, padding along like a startled ape. He held the lamp up high, and in his left hand, while he gripped a Colt .45 revolver in his right. He had a metal pitcher hooked to his right elbow. It contained the water he had gone to fetch.

The Ranger stayed against the wall, shadowed by a bulge of red ore. Kratz came within ten feet of him before he suddenly realzed who it was.

"Yuh got company, Kratz," announced Hatfield, coming up on his haunches.

"Ranger!" bellowed the foreman.

The pitcher of water was spilled as Kratz threw up his Colt. He fired, the explosion banging in the gallery, smashing at the ears. But the Ranger's pistol had spoken an instant before, and Kratz's bullet drilled dirt.

Hatfield had hit the mine foreman in the chest, and Dutch sagged, blood spurting from his mouth. He half whirled, but caught himself, his terrific physical strength pulling him back to life for a moment. He managed to get the revolver up again and blasted away as Hatfield sent a finisher between the bloodshot, glinting eyes.

Kratz staggered, and collapsed. Hatfield hurried to him, seizing the overturned lamp. He checked the dead man, still quivering, but done.

Stepping over Kratz, the Ranger moved up the shaft, gun in one hand, lamp in the other. He gave a low whistle as he observed the richness of the stuff surrounding him. Gouging out a chunk of brilliant-red crystals and brownish ore with his knife point, he wrapped it in his kerchief and placed it in his pocket. He was pretty sure what it was, but he would check it.

Moving on, up a gentle incline, he came to a small widening, and glanced around at Kratz's arsenal. There were a couple of shotguns, two heavy rifles leaning against the wall, and a box containing ammunition. Also food supplies, a couple of water barrels and blankets for a bed were in the little underground cavern. As the Ranger was inspecting these, he heard a voice say:

"Kratz, yuh fool! Where are yuh?"

"Doone!" thought the Ranger. "He's come!"

He snatched up one of the rifles and

several cartridges. Setting down the lamp, he ran swiftly back through the shaft. At last he reached the turn and, throwing a shell into the firing-chamber of the big game rifle, lay down, head and shoulder out beyond the jut of the wall.

He could see the central part of the rock chamber and as he watched, sighting on the lamp, Gig Doone came into the circle of illumination.

"Dutch!" called Doone, pausing in the light. "We've won, yuh old rascal! Oberlin and his pards are givin' me the mine, and—"

"Throw up yore paws, Doone!" commanded the Ranger, thunderously. "It's Hathaway—Ranger Hatfield, to be particular."

Doone stared into the blackness ahead of him. He was pinned in the light. The echoes confused him, and he could not judge how far away his arch-enemy was.

"Come out, Hatfield—Ranger!" he called. "Let's talk it over."

"There ain't nothin' to talk about, Doone. We got the girl, safe and sound. Kratz won't help yuh no more. I want to question yuh about a lot of things—pizenin's, killin's, things like that. And Oberlin won't ever give yuh the mine. I savvy what yuh're after—"

"Cuss yuh!" snarled Doone.

His elaborate scheme, worked out after being balked once, had collapsed like a house of cards.

"He's goin' to strike," thought the Ranger, and braced himself.

"Don't, yuh fool!" he roared.

But Doone dropped a hand, and flipped something from inside his shirt front. It was not a gun, but a slender metal tube which he sought to hurl at his foe. Hatfield's finger joint squeezed the rifle trigger. The heavy gun kicked at his shoulder, and Doone took the powerful bullet in the heart.

It killed him instantly. He was knocked sprawling, and the nitro he had thrown made a feeble arc and landed.

As he finished his shot, Hatfield threw himself back, around the bulge of the red wall. There was a violent, flashing detonation, and then blackness hit the Ranger. . . .

When Jim Hatfield came to, he lay on a cot, and Bert Webb and Rita Oberlin were at his side. The town doctor had been working over him.

"He ain't dead, but he got one mighty bad shock," the physician was saying.

Hatfield opened his eyes and they rested on Bert Webb.

"Hullo, cowboy," he murmured.

"Jim!" Webb seized his hand. "Yuh been out for two hours! I heard the explosion, and we got down there and found yuh lyin' near the partition Yuh musta been blowed clear of the cave-in. Most of that red shaft folded up."

"Doone's buried in there," muttered the Ranger. "And me, I shore feel like I'm goin' to sleep."

"Go to it," ordered the doctor. "It's what yuh need."

It was two days before Hatfield was up. Oberlin had gone home, but had come back to town again. The rancher chief had to keep thanking the Ranger for all he had done.

The cowman bought drinks in the Grand Central when Hatfield was able to join him.

"That Webb's a good boy, ain't he," he remarked. "He'll turn into a fine cowman. Rita shore thinks the world of him. Reckon they'll get hitched."

"They're nice folks," agreed Hatfield. "Now looka here, Oberlin, I got somethin' to show yuh 'bout that mine yuh own. Come along."

He led the way up the sidewalk, and turned into Gig Doone's laboratory, with the mystified Oberlin at his heels. The Ranger took something from his pocket—a kerchief, wrapped around a chunk of reddish ore.

"This is from the mine," he explained. "Now watch."

He lit an oil flame, placed the ore in a glass retort and heated the bulb, holding it with metal tongs. Oberlin stared at him, blinking, not comprehending.

After a time, Hatfield nodded, blew out the flame, and cooled the glass retort.

"Look, Oberlin," he said. "See them little silver droplets on the neck?"

"Yeah. What is it?"

Hatfield's answer was astounding.

"Mercury. That ore is the red sulphide—cinnabar! It's rich, mighty rich, too, and there's big deposits of it in that mountain and runnin' through to yore range. That's what Gig Doone was after. Kratz, Ulman and Doone discovered it, and tried to keep it hid by boardin' up the shaft. Then they tried to wreck Robertson so's he'd sell to 'em for a song. The mercury's worth plenty—much more'n coal. Spill from that section of the mountain got into Van Horn Crik.

At low water, it plzened yore cows that drunk too much, mercuric compounds being mostly right deadly to take.

"Another thing Doone was after is this. There's plenty of limestone through yore range, and it's mighty useful in refinin' mercury ores. Tate was stealin' yore cattle, in on their deal, and helpin' finance it.

"Doone meant to git rid of you cowmen. He figgered the cinnabar run well into yore range, and he not only wanted the limestone, but room to expand. Besides, yuh were annoyin' the miners, threatenin' to interfere with 'em."

"So that was it! Ranger, yuh've shore done a job here!"

"That mercury's worth a million—mebbe more. You fellers can sell and get rich quick —or yuh can keep the mine shut down and save yore range. That's up to you. As for me, I'm ridin'. . . ."

* * * * *

Cap McDowell listened to Hatfield's report of the poison ore and the worse poison that had been Gig Doone.

"So Webb's goin' to marry Rita Oberlin and he's goin' to turn into a cowman, huh?" said Cap. "Yuh done a great piece of work out there, Jim. Doone come mighty close to takin' yuh with him down below! Yuh look sorta peaked. Yuh need a furlough?"

Bill McDowell rustled the yellow telegram sheet in his gnarled hand. Hatfield wanted a look at it, so McDowell held is so he could read it, and the words said:

WE GOT TO HAVE A COMPANY OF RANGERS RIGHT AWAY! THE DEVIL AND ALL HAS BROKE LOOSE DOWN HERE IN VAL VERDE!

"I reckon I'll take that furlough," said Hatfield, "in Val Verde."

Shortly after, McDowell watched him ride, carrying with him the all-powerful law of the Rangers across the Lone Star State.

Lone Star Lore

HERE are five questions to test your knowledge of that great body of lawmen, the Texas Rangers. Count yourself 20% for each correct answer, and if you get 60% or over, you may consider yourself well-informed on the subject. The answers are on Page 58—but don't look before trying!

1. When were the Texas Rangers organized?
2. Are the Texas Rangers still actively engaged in law enforcement in the State of Texas?
3. Who was Captain James Callahan of the Texas Rangers?
4. Who commanded the Ranger Battalion which took part in the famous San Elizario Salt Basin War?
5. Who were the Horse Marines of the Texas Rangers?

RANGE WAIF

By W. E. CARLETON

Mogollon Maguire Solves the Mystery Behind the Teeth-Breaking Biscuits Which Threaten the M Bar M Dude Ranch with the Loss of Its Guests and a Freckled Orphan with the Loss of His Home!

MOGOLLON MAGUIRE cuddled a jigger of red-eye in his calloused hands, then tossed its contents down the hatch. He put his elbows on the drink-stained table and glared back at the sawed-off stranger who had given him the twice-over before sidling up to the bar.

The stranger spoke guardedly to the bartender, jerking his thumb in Mogollon's direction. Mogollon pricked up his ears.

"Him?" said Cactus Joe, the bartender in a hoarse whisper that could have been heard in the street. "He's Mogollon Maguire, runs the M Bar M dude ranch. Used to ride with the Wolf Brennan wild bunch. One o' them renegades clawed out his eye, I reckon. He's got a limp, too, seems his kneecap was busted by a lawman's .45 slug."

A bony, sandhill crane of a man whirled from the brass rail. He approached the inquisitive stranger, and his hand fastened like an eagle's talon upon his short neck.

"I'm Slim Ross," he announced with a heavy scowl. "Me and my woman run the Circle R dude ranch eight miles out of Snake Bend. You ain't foolin' me, Runt Judkins. Yuh're a runner for that big Triangle XX dude outfit over in Twombley County. I ain't forgettin' the four payin' guests yuh hog-wrassled away from me."

Mogollon's pale eye began to widen beneath his stringy brow. He slyly rose from the table, edged toward the bar, watching the two men.

"I don't know what's eatin' yuh, pardner," growled Judkins to Slim Ross. "If any dude quit yore spread and shifted to my boss' Triangle XX, he probably wasn't gettin' enough to eat at yore place."

"Eat them words, skunk-face," barked Slim.

He reached for his smokepole. Runt's hand darted to a bulge in his coat under the armpit. A hideout six-gun seemed to hop into his fist. Mogollon rushed up, dragging out his ancient Peacemaker as Ross matched his move.

But Runt Judkins shaded them both on the draw. Swiftly he lined his sights on Slim's brisket.

Over the rim of the bar yawned the twin muzzles of a stubby scattergun, held in the firm grasp of Cactus Joe.

The barkeep let go with both barrels. Runt screeched like a catamount burning alive. He dived head-first through the batwing doors, both hands spread over the seat of his pants. His hideout six-gun slid from nerveless fingers and thumped on the puncheons.

"Blast it, Cactus," husked Mogollon, his old Peacemaker dangling from his hand, "the little runt needed salivatin', but I don't hanker to see any jasper blown wide open."

Cactus Joe ejected two dead hand-loaded brass shells from his stubby young cannon, inserted a brace of live ones.

"Salivatin' is shore what he got," he opined. "Them shells is loaded with rock salt."

"I bet the squirt will come hobblin' this way again when the sting wears off," said Slim Ross. "Mogollon, you and me run the only dude ranches hereabouts. We goin' to set by and see that stinkin' Triangle XX outfit take our business away from us?"

Mogollon shrugged. He squinted his one good eye at Ross.

"How we goin' to hobble the Triangle XX?"

Slim's coarse features took on a shrewd, calculating air.

"Mogollon, we've got to work together. Our first job is not to let any of our dude-ranch business go over to Twombley

County. If one of my guests gets the itchin' foot, I'll do my best to herd him over to the M Bar M. If any of yores start stampedin' in the same direction, yuh head 'em to my Circle R. See?"

Mogollon seized Slim's hand in a fervent shake.

"Pardner," he said, "she's a go. The war's on. Name your pizen."

They quaffed two snorts of redeye apiece, then sauntered to the hitch-rack. Slim swung aboard his ribby roan gelding, and Mogollon hoisted himself into the driver's seat of his wagon loaded with grub for ravenous dudes.

Warmed by the liquor in his belly, Mogollon dozed to the rhythmic plodding of the horses. Back at the M Bar M ranch house, he limped into the kitchen.

There sat a brawny female with hair that flamed like a woodpecker's topknot. A hand that could have strangled a boa constrictor dabbed at her wide-spaced blue eyes with a handkerchief the size of a tablecloth.

This was Mogollon's lawfully wedded wife, known from the Gila to the Platte as Little Eva. Beside her sat Mandy Jane, the negro cook, sobbing vociferously.

On a three-legged stool roosted a fiery-haired dogie kid with a freckle-spattered face that looked as if it had run after it was molded. Looking up into his soulful brown eyes, a heavy-footed black-and-tan mongrel hound squatted on its haunches, pointed its nose toward the ceiling and poured forth a most doleful howl.

"Who's goin' to croak?" cried Mogollon. "I sure hope it ain't me. After the hot summer I lived through, I'd admire to stick around till snow flies."

"I ain't got no maw or paw," wailed the homely kid.

Mandy Jane snuffled a sob, and the mongrel emitted another howl.

Mogollon scrubbed his jaw with a grimy hand.

"Me, my old man got knocked off when I was a younker, too. When I saw the larrupin's my young pards got from their old men, I reckoned I got my break by not havin' none."

"You cold-blooded viper," squalled Little Eva, "you'd spoon out sour gruel to your sick grandfather, then snicker while he drooled."

"Pore Spotty, the pore orphan boy," moaned Mandy Jane, rocking her squat body back and forth.

"Say, what is this?" squawked Mogollon. "Where-at did this Spotty younker drift from?"

"He's a wandering range waif," replied Little Eva. She thrust out to him the big white apron which Mogollon customarily hauled on over his head when he performed distasteful kitchen chores. "Spotty, your wanderin' days are ended. From now on, you take orders from Mandy Jane."

Leaving Spotty bedecked in his white apron and diving into a panful of sudsy dishes, Mogollan tugged Little Eva aside and told her the morning's happenings at Cactus Joe's.

"For once," she approved, "you showed symptoms of brains. Slim's right. We gotta work together. I never cottoned to him or that soppy wife of his, but we can't let Runt Judkins and that Triangle XX outfit run us out of business."

Mogollon wagged his head and chewed worriedly on his lower lip.

"I'm sort of smellin' polecat in this range-waif deal, too," he said. "How do we know that Runt Judkins didn't send him here to do us dirt?"

"How can you accuse pore little Spotty of being a pardner in such crookedness?" demanded Little Eva. "Isn't it cruel enough to be a homeless range waif, with only his little dog, Chum, for a friend?"

"No wonder he's homeless," commented Mogollon. "That little dog Chum looks to me like it's got a stomach that ate him out of house and home. I'm shore glad to hand over my kitchen chores to him, but seein' how Slim tipped us off to Runt and his Triangle XX—"

"I'd sooner accuse Runt of planting

Mandy Jane here," Little Eva snapped. "Don't forget that she showed up here, too, out of a clear sky, on her uppers and looking for a job, and she turned out to be the best cook that ever shot biscuits on this range.

"And don't plan to go on booze-swilling benders in your spare time. Spotty's taking over your kitchen chores so you'll have time to teach our guests how to ride and take them on horseback trips. We got to show 'em more of the wide open spaces than the ranchhouse veranda and croquet court. Now get going. They're waiting for you to saddle up right now."

As Mogollon hobbled to the horse corral, he sighted Spotty through the open kitchen door, industriously drying dishes. Outside the door squatted the mongrel Chum, worrying a sizeable beef bone.

"Spotty may be okay," he growled, "but I sort of suspicion Runt Judkins' finger in the pie." He paused to pat the battered Peacemaker that bumpily rode his hip. "If I run across that Runt sidewinder again—"

After all, he reckoned, the range waif had given him a break by getting him out of the kitchen. But when he returned from jouncing over rough trails with five hefty middle-aged couples, Mogollon wondered if Spotty wasn't getting the best of the bargain. The bumpy gallop on a ribby crowbait shot knife-sharp pains through his crippled leg.

Yet, he dared not complain. Too often Little Eva had reminded him that he and a certain Mr. Riley led similar lives remote from care . . .

Two days later, after one of those rides, while Mogollon was bolting roast beef at the kitchen table, Spotty was washing dishes and Mandy Jane bustled about at the sizzling range, disaster fell upon the M Bar M ranch.

Into the dining room Little Eva bore tray loads of steaming dishes. The morning ride had whetted the guests' appetites, and they eliminated the victuals like a pack of lobos.

There was a sudden ominous cracking sound from the dining room. Mogollon rose quickly, his one eye full of dark worry. His memory clicked back to the day Wolf Brennan broke his upper plate gnawing an ear of corn too zealously and he had to be roped and hog-tied to keep him from shooting up the camp.

And history had repeated itself. Through the crack in the swing door to the dining-room, the peeping Mogollon beheld rolypoly Mr. Abraham Snyder, of Yonkers, New York, extracting a hard object from his mouth. Beside him, plump Mrs. Abraham plucked a white lump from a half-eaten Parker House roll.

"Concrete!" cried Mrs. Snyder.

"No, plaster of Paris," corrected Mr. Snyder.

He slipped from his lips an upper plate of store teeth cleft neatly in twain, slid the halves into a handkerchief.

"Why," gasped Little Eva, "I can't understand it."

"I understand this much," lisped Mr. Snyder, "I came here on my doctor's orders to get exercise, eat plain ranch food and here I am, with my grinders on the blink and my dentist back in Yonkers."

Skinny Mr. Eustace Applegate held up a Parker House roll, rent it asunder and came up with a pair of plaster of Paris pellets the size of .22 cartridges.

"Have a look at that!" he commanded.

"This is the limit," hissed bulky Mr. Simon Sobel. "Pinch the cook."

"That's right," said Mrs. Snyder. "Hold her and report her to the bonding agency. Surely, Mrs. Maguire, you wouldn't employ a cook who isn't bonded."

A gush of scarlet suffused Little Eva's broad cheeks.

"No," she admitted, with a shake of her head.

"What?" roared Mr. Snyder. "I was lucky to get off with a pair of busted teeth. Right now, for all I know, we may be dying of poison, my wife and I."

"I'll call the sheriff," volunteered Mr. Applegate.

He dashed to the wall telephone in the cubbyhole that was the office.

Into the kitchen charged Little Eva. Mandy Jane cringed.

"Oh, Lordy, Lordy, Mis' 'Guire," the tearful cook sobbed, "I never done it."

Little Eva gripped her arms, rushed her unceremoniously into a vacant linen closet, slammed the door and locked it.

"Stay put there for your date with Sheriff Teasle," she grated. "Maybe Runt Judkins'll come and bail you out."

Mogollon bore down on the range waif to give him the bum's rush into the meat-house and hold him, too, for questioning.

"But the old war-hatchet is plumb right this time," he had to admit. "I know what chances a scullion in that kitchen has to

stuff buns with plaster of Paris. I hate to say it, but it looks to me like Mandy Jane is our rabbit meat."

From the dining room buzzed the lowered voices of the guests in wrathy conclave.

"Ladies and gents, this is an outrage!" Little Eva announced. "I can see the workings of a rival outfit behind it all. I hope you'll bear with me while I get a new setup and the guilty party punished."

As spokesman for the guests, Mr. Applegate issued a grim ultimatum.

"We have agreed that we cannot patronize an institution with such a negligent cuisine. We shall forthwith make arrangements to go to the Triangle XX Ranch."

"No, no," cried Little Eva. "Don't go there. That's the outfit we suspect; you'd be playing right into their hands. If you must go, go to the Circle R. It's in the county, and the owner's wife does the cooking."

"That sounds good to me," said Applegate, and Abraham Snyder groaned: "If I only had my teeth."

Mogollon heard Snyder's groaning comment and limped into the room.

"Just thought of it now, Mr. Snyder," he said, rolling his tongue around his crooked bottom teeth. "I've got a set of grinders in my room. Ain't used 'em in years 'cause they kept fallin' out whenever I sank 'em into a hunk of beef. Yuh're welcome to 'em."

Mogollon hobbled out and returned in a few minutes. He handed the Yonkers man an aged plate of false teeth. The teeth were yellow and chipped. Abraham Snyder grimaced and shoved the plate into his mouth.

He had difficulty wedging it into place. It bulged out his upper lip as if he had his tongue thrust there and when he bit down, the teeth threatened to come in contact with his lower jaw.

"It doesn't fit," groaned Snyder, talking in a way that suggested he had his mouth filled with marbles and was trying to gargle with them. "But it'll have to do." He glared at Mogollon and Little Eva.

The guests snickered at the faces Snyder was making, then quickly scattered to their rooms to pack. Applegate telephoned the Circle R and made the arrangements, for securing accommodations for them there.

"This finishes us," sobbed Little Eva as she and Mogollon entered the kitchen. "We're ruined."

"Yuh still have me, my little prairie flower," Mogollon comforted.

The Little Prairie Flower whirled on Mogollon, shook her fist in his face.

"You slobbering booze-guzzler, and haven't I got something! I suppose you're fixing right now to wrap your face around Cactus Joe's redeye to drown your sorrow. Don't figure that the M Bar M will stake you to any more drinks."

Spotty hauled his white apron over his head.

"I'll be goin', Mis' Maguire," he whimpered. "I'm plumb sorry. I can see, though, you won't be needin' me no more."

Little Eva vigorously shook her head.

"No, Spotty, you won't go. As long as I have a crust of bread and a roof over my head, you can count on me to make a home for you." She turned to Mogollon. "I'm going to make one last desperate plea to change our guests' minds and get them to stay."

She cannon-balled out of the kitchen like a longhorn mother at the bawl of her calf.

Mogollon's good eye raked Spotty's pants, where the area around a side pocket was powdered with what looked flour.

Whipping his battered Peacemaker clear of leather, Mogollon pranced through the kitchen door like a big dancing mouse. Spotty recoiled in terror, and Chum barked in terror. Mogollon shot from the hip, blasted a slug above Chum's shaggy head.

"Don't shoot, Mr. Mogollon," caterwauled the range waif. "Oh, please don't shoot my little Chum."

"Where's that dog's license?" yelled Mogollon.

"I ain't got none," admitted Spotty. "Why do yuh want to know?"

"'Cause I'm Dog Catcher Maguire of Snake Bend," lied Mogollon. "It's my duty to shoot all unlicensed four-footed sausage meat, younker."

Again he leveled the Peacemaker.

"Don't kill him," begged Spotty. "I'll buy the license. I'll get Mis' Eva to help me."

With tail tucked between his legs, Chum doubled upon all fours and raced for the nearest State line.

Mogollon glumly shook his head.

"Younker, it's too late to get that license," he decreed. From the kitchen wall he snatched the pad and pencil used by Mandy Jane for listing needed supplies. Thrusting them at the range waif he said: "There's just one way to save yore dog Chum when he comes yelpin' back. That's to write down pronto the name of the polecat who sent yuh here to the M Bar M."

Spotty hesitated.

"Write," prodded Mogollon, "or Chum dies."

Spotty scrawled hastily. Mogollon grabbed the pad and glanced at it.

"You gotta do better than that, kid." Spotty had written no words, but had sketched what looked like a crude bull's-eye. "Write, don't draw pictures." He extended pad and pencil.

Chum gingerly skulked into the offing. Mogollon tilted up the Peacemaker muzzle.

"I can't do no better," screamed the horrified Spotty. "I can't read, and I can't write!"

A substantial hand descended over Mogollon's shoulder. Behind him bulked a grim-jowled Little Eva.

"You wolf in the manger, you rattler!" she shouted. "It isn't bad enough that you spent your younger days looting and pillaging, but now in your second childhood, you have to rampage around shooting up orphan boys' pets."

In her rear, the guests were sifting out, bag and baggage. They had arrived in time to witness the return of Chum. On the ground lay Mandy Jane's pad.

"The brute!" fumed Mrs. Snyder.

Broken glass crashed and tinkled. Through a window sailed Mandy Jane, carrying with her window frame, jagged fragments of panes and all. As the crow flies, she scurried for the Snake Bend Turnpike.

Up the turnpike rode Sheriff Ben Teasle, a chunky man on a chunky cayuse. Abreast of the M Bar M hacienda, he hoisted himself out of the saddle. Straight at him plunged the befuddled fugitive from the linen closet.

Right there Ben made his mistake; he bore down on his intended prisoner at a brisk waddle. Mandy Jane whirled, fanned the breeze with a roundhouse swing that packed dynamite. Her fist bounced off the sheriff's nose with a *plop* like the smashing of a gourd.

Blood gushed down Benjamin's blocky chin.

But he wasn't re-elected year after year because he toted his star as an ornament. He charged into Mandy Jane full-tilt. Behind her back he locked her arms in the time-honored policeman's hold. To the ranchhouse he marched her.

"Oh, Lordy, Lordy," she moaned. "I never done nothin'. I swear I didn't. Mr. Sheriff."

He herded her into the kitchen, perched her in a chair and handcuffed her.

Up the turnpike came a buckboard, Slim Ross holding the ribbons. The guests flocked to the edge of the roadway.

Slim reined in the pair of leggy crowbaits. He descended from the driver's seat.

Mogollon's good eye swept the scene of impending disaster.

On the veranda, Little Eva held a handkerchief over her face, her shoulders quaking with sobs.

Outside the kitchen door Spotty whimpered, with Chum not far away, industriously digging up an old bone. Mogollon cast a glance at the powder smear on Spotty's pants pockets. Down to the buckboard he hobbled like an agitated cricket.

Slim was assisting Mrs. Applegate over the front wheel and into the buckboard. One foot on the hub, she poised midway.

Holding her hand with grotesque ballroom courtesy, Slim steadied her in her weighty ascent.

At that moment, Mogollon struck with the fury of a Kansas twister. His rush swept Slim to the hardpan roadway like a snake bird striking a sidewinder. Knocked into space from her unstable perch, Mrs. Applegate crashed with a screech that ended in a windless grunt.

Mogollon swarmed over Slim Ross, staggered him with a looping punch, Ross growled and waded in. He knocked Mogollon flat on his back with a smash to the jaw, then leaped over him with the butt of his gun upraised.

The gun arced downward, but Mogollon squirmed out of the way. He started to draw his own Peacemaker, then changed his mind. He got a hold on Slim's leg, jerked him off his feet, rolled on top of him, began pummeling him with both hands.

Mogollon didn't bother about any rules. He gouged Slim's right eye with a horny thumb and for good measure bit a chunk out of his ear while the onlooking guests screeched in horror.

Little Eva plunged through the massed guests. In her wake waddled the sheriff.

Little Eva gripped her spouse by the scruff of the neck and slack of the breeches, set him upright like a tenpin.

"You ruffian, now I know you ought to be in a padded cell," she cried. "The idea, pouncing on poor Mr. Ross and pounding him to a pulp. I thought we agreed to work together with him."

Mogollon turned to Spotty. He thrust his

hand into the range waif's pants pocket. From there he extracted a paper bag about a quarter full. He opened it and peered into it. It contained white powder.

"Plaster of Paris!" he said. "Just as I expected."

Mr. Snyder snatched the bag and peered into it. "Right you are," he said. "It's marked right on the side of the bag. That seems to settle what busted my teeth. How did you get wise to him?"

"That powder smeared over his pants pocket," replied Mogollon. "It sparkled more than plain white flour and he was wearing that big white apron while he was working in the kitchen. I knew he had to reach under that big apron to get that smear on his pants pocket and I've seen enough plaster of Paris to figger that's what it was."

"That's all right," said Little Eva, "but where does Slim Ross fit into the picture? How come you had to beat him up?"

"Because of what Spotty wrote on Mandy Jane's pad which I doped out to be a circle with an 'R' in it. For a kid who couldn't read or write, that was the natural thing he'd draw when asked about the rancher's name. It's just the same as ritin' 'Slim Ross.'

"Runt Judkins had nothin' to do with it after all. He just happened into Cactus Joe's and Ross saw a chance to fake a ruckus with Runt and get me to work with him, knowin' all the time that I'd blame the Triangle XX for any trouble that cropped up."

"What've yuh got to say about it, Button?" the sheriff growled at Spotty.

"I did it," whimpered the range waif. "Slim sent me here to put plaster of Paris in the biscuits so the dudes would quit the M Bar M and go over to the Circle R."

"Now I know who he is," said Sheriff Teasle. "He's Slim Ross' young half-brother. Slim got him from the Home for Feeble Minded. Now I can see why Slim was so generous. He wanted to use the pore kid to do his dirty work. I guess it's up to me to get the bracelets off that cook of yores, Eva."

He waddled into the kitchen a moment later and metal clicked as he removed the manacles from Mandy Jane's wrists.

"I reckon now yuh'll send me back to the Home," sniffled Spotty. "They'd never let me take my Chum back with me."

"No, Spotty," said Little Eva, "they won't take Chum away from you and they won't take you back to that home. You'll stay right here, you two, you and Chum. Even if our guests all walk out on us, you stay right here. That goes for you, too, Mandy Jane," she added to the cook as she emerged from the kitchen.

"We aren't walking out on you, though," said Mr. Snyder. "There's no better cook in the world than Mandy Jane. Are the rest of you folks staying?"

The guests smiled and nodded.

By the turnpike Slim Ross wobbled about in a daze.

"As for you, Slim," the sheriff barked at him, "I'm advisin' yuh to get out of town and never come back. Yore wife can stay behind to wind up yore business for yuh."

Mogollon flung his arm on Spotty's shoulders. "Yuh're plumb welcome, kid," he beamed. "First off, I reckon I saw a good fat bone in the ice box that'll just about fit yore Chum, pard."

Chum barked his eager appreciation. The Range waif wiped a shirt sleeve across his eyes, but he managed a wide grin.

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON PAGE 52

1. The Texas Rangers were organized in 1835, and were said to "ride like Mexicans, shoot like Tennesseeans, and fight like the very devil."
2. The historic Texas Ranger force is a part of the State Department of Public Safety, and still carries out its law-enforcement duties in Texas.
3. In 1855, Captain Callahan organized a troop of Texas Rangers for the purpose of putting down a Lipan Indian uprising. He chased the Indians into Mexico.
4. Major John B. Jones was in command of the Frontier Battalion at San Elizario in 1877.
5. Major Isaac W. Burton and his Company of Texas Rangers captured three loaded merchant ships during the Texas Revolution. After this experience his corps was dubbed the Horse Marines.

WIDOW'S CHOICE

By WILLIAM MORRISON

When It Comes to Swains, Deborah Meacham Fancies a Real Western Fighting Man!

DEBORAH MEACHAM eyed the two men sharply and sniffed in disdain.

"What are you shufflin' about?" she snapped. "This ain't no dance floor."

Big sheepish-looking Cal Barton wiped his bald head nervously with a bandanna handkerchief.

"We—I—I've brought a present for yuh, Deborah," he stammered. "It's these here—" he held out what looked like a handful of weeds—"these here flowers."

Deborah accepted the seeming weeds ungraciously.

"They don't smell so good," she said, "but I guess the purty sentiment is the main thing."

"It's fur yore birthday," said Cal.

"My birthday? Who in tarnation told you I had a birthday?"

"Well, Dr. Collins he said yuh was forty-one years old—"

"Forty-one?" Deborah's eyes glinted dangerously. "Tell that old whiskey-soaked sawbones to go back to school and learn to count. I ain't a day over thirty-nine."

"I thought it was thirty-eight, Deborah," gallantly put in Sam Riddle, the other man. He was about a foot shorter than his companion, and crowned with a head of luxuriant black hair. "Cal's tryin' to make yuh seem older, so yuh'll be nearer his own age."

"That's a lie," mumbled Cal Barton. "Deborah, I actually thought—"

"So I look forty-one, do I, Cal?"

"Yuh don't look more than a young gal," interrupted Sam Riddle. He held out a box. "Deborah, I brought yuh this here present for yore thirty-eighth birthday."

"More flowers?"

"Wild raspberries that I picked myself."

Deborah's eyes softened. Fresh fruit and vegetables were rarely to be had near the mining town of Kenyonville, and the gift was a welcome one.

"That's nice of you, Sam."

Sam Riddle beamed. "I was thinkin', Deborah, as how you and me—"

Deborah's face hardened again. "Now, look here, Sam. I told you agin and agin to wait till we're alone before you ask me to marry you. And when you do, the answer will still be, 'No.'"

"Shucks, Deborah—"

"You know my reasons, Sam. You're a short man, and I'm a big woman. I don't aim to make the mistake I made the first time. Sol Meacham, peace to his soul, was no bigger than you are, and everybody snickered at both him and me. Said I threw him around like a sack of potatoes. It was a lie, of course, but they said it anyway. And you're just like him."

"Deborah," Sam Riddle said earnestly, "even if yuh wanted to, yuh couldn't throw me around. I'm little, but I'm strong. I'm stronger than Cal here."

"That ain't true," interrupted Cal Barton mildly. "I kin take yuh and twist yuh into knots."

"Cal Barton and Sam Riddle, don't you start no fights in front of me!" warned Deborah. "I won't stand it. It's enough that you fight about how to work your claim. Although why I use such a word as 'fight,' I don't know. You ain't got the spirit, Cal, to fight a mosquito. All the same, I'm tellin' you, and it's for the last time, that I won't marry neither of you."

"Deborah, is there somebody else?" asked Sam plaintively.

"If there is, it's none of your business. But I'll tell you again that you're too short, Sam. You're just like Sol. And you, Cal, you're too much of a lunkhead, and besides you're bald. So go away, and although I say thanks for the flowers and the berries, don't bother me agin. I'm a hard-workin' woman, and I got a lot of washin' to do."

While her two would-be swains slunk disconsolately away, Deborah turned back

to her tub. She muttered to herself as she rubbed angrily at the clothes.

"So Doc Collins said I was forty-one, did he? The old two-faced whiskey-hound! Asks me to marry him, and then tells lies about me behind my back!"

For a moment her face turned grim as her thoughts revolved about Dr. Collins. Then her expression softened.

"Sam Riddle is a real man," she thought. "Handsome, and with a fine head of hair. But shucks, he's too short just like Sol was. I'd be crazy to marry *him*."

With their burro laden with supplies, Sam Riddle and Cal Barton were climbing up the trail that led from Kenyonville to the mountain stream beside which they had staked their claim. Cal Barton had an idea he ought to feel miserable at having been turned down, but actually he felt just a little sad.

The fact was that Cal had difficulty in feeling miserable about anything that didn't threaten his life itself. He had a placid disposition, too placid for any man of spirit, and Deborah had been right in calling him a lunkhead.

He stared now at his partner, Sam Riddle, congratulated himself on not being short, like Sam, and was conscious of a faint sensation of envy at sight of Sam's magnificent hair. If he had a head of hair like that, he felt sure that Deborah would not have turned him down.

But a luxuriant growth on his scalp, he knew, was completely out of his reach. He had tried everything from bear grease to remedies discovered by Indian medicine men, and nothing had worked. Bald he was, and bald he would remain.

A hundred feet ahead of them, a stone tumbled noisily down a hill, and both Cal and Sam came to a sudden stop. The burro, without orders, planted his feet firmly on the ground, and bent his head to nibble a blade of grass.

"Yuh think that could have been an Injun?" Cal asked uneasily.

"Don't know," returned Sam. His sharp gaze searched the hillside. "I don't see none."

"Yuh wouldn't. They're too clever to let theirselves be seen."

"Then they oughta be clever enough not to let theirselves be heard," pointed out Sam. "So I figger that couldn't have been an Injun. Let's get goin', or we won't reach our claim before nightfall."

After a little prodding, the burro got moving again. As the two men trudged after it, Cal continued to think uneasily of that falling stone. It might have been caused by some wild animal, but there was still the chance that the Indian theory was right. And if that was the case, Cal had an idea that the same Indian would soon be displaying a couple of more scalps as trophies—one bald, one covered with luxuriant hair.

"Don't see how them Injuns got the nerve to come raidin' here when there's soldiers guardin' the whole Bozeman trail," said Cal.

Sam grunted. "Soldiers can't be everywhere. We gotta take care of ourselves."

It was characteristic of the two men that neither bore the other any grudge for wanting to marry Deborah Meacham. Cal was not the man to bear a grudge for anything so unimportant, and Sam knew that it was only reasonable for any man who knew Deborah to want to marry her.

After eating the meals they cooked for themselves day after day, with everything either boiled till it was soggy and tasteless or fried till it was soggy and tasted only too strong, Deborah's cooking was a real treat. Sam wanted to eat it every day of his life.

If there were Indians nearby, they were keeping to themselves. Though Cal continued to glance about uneasily from time to time, he heard no further startling noises. By sundown they reached the cabin for which they had been heading.

Before turning in, they sat down to one of their usual meals, half-boiled and half-fried this time. The bacon was burned, the doughy mess Sam had manufactured from flour and water was raw and lumpy inside and greasy out, and the coffee was feeble to the point of exhaustion.

"Wish she'd have cooked us a good dinner before she sent us away," Cal said wistfully.

Sam didn't answer. He was staring at something on the other side of the stream. As Cal looked at him, he got up slowly and casually.

"Don't show no excitement, Cal. But kind of saunter toward the cabin. I think them Injuns are here after all, and we'll be needin' our rifles."

"Don't show no excitement?" Cal started up as if he had suddenly found himself sitting on a cactus plant. "I ain't waitin' for no tommyhawk, Sam!"

Cal got to the doorway at the same instant

as his partner, and squeezed past him just as an arrow furrowed Sam's luxuriant growth of hair. Sam howled, twisted around like an eel, and slammed the door shut.

"Did it get yuh, Sam?" Cal asked anxiously.

"No, it didn't, but no thanks to you! That Injun wouldn't have shot that arrow if yuh had made believe he wasn't there!"

"I don't know, Sam. He might and he mightn't, and I was takin' no chances. What are we goin' to do now?"

Sam peered out of a chink between two logs.

"We'll just have to stay in here and fight 'em off, I reckon. I saw just two of them, but there must be others."

"Supposin' they sneak up on the cabin in the dark and poke their rifles in?"

"Don't be supposin' so much!" Sam snapped angrily. "We got rifles of our own, ain't we? If we hold 'em off tonight, mebbe somebody'll hear the noise of the shootin' and get word to one of the army posts."

Cal stared out, trying to see where the Indians lay in hiding. But it was growing dark, and in the twisted shadows that sprawled across the stream it was impossible to detect a trace of anything living.

Something whizzed through the air, struck with a thud against the cabin wall, then bounced back.

"Sounds like an arrow," muttered Cal, puzzled. "But no arrow will go through the logs. What are they shootin' for? Tryin' to scare us?"

A flash of red and yellow light came through a chink in the walls.

"Fire!" exclaimed Sam. "Cal, that was a burnin' arrow! They're tryin' to set fire to the cabin, burn us out!"

"Lucky it bounced off."

"Yes, but suppose one comes along that don't bounce off!"

They heard another whir, then another. Then there came the sound of something crackling above them.

"There's one on the roof!" breathed Sam. "It's settin' fire to the wood!"

Cal stared at him in horror. Once they had to leave the burning cabin, they would make perfect targets against the blazing red background.

"There's only one thing to do," decided Sam. "Get water from the stream. I'm littler than you, Cal, so I won't make such a good target. And besides, the fire don't give much light yet. I'll make a dash for the stream with a bucket, while you cover me with both rifles, ready loaded."

"Yuh'll get killed, Sam!"

"I'll get killed anyway if I stay. Throw open the door, Cal, and start shootin'!"

Cal crawled forward and pushed open the door. As Sam dashed out, bent low to the ground with the bucket in his hand, Cal saw something move on the other side of the stream. There came a pair of arrows, then the crack of a rifle.

He fired quickly at the flash, heard a yell of pain as if his bullet had struck home. He moved over to the shelter of the walls, but left the door open so that Sam would have no difficulty getting in when he returned.

Overhead the fire seemed to be taking hold of the wood. The crackling was growing louder, and a ruddy light played on the cabin's earthen floor. Cal groaned. If Sam didn't return in a hurry, it would be impossible to put the fire out—at least with one bucket of water. He looked out anxiously.

A small figure loomed out of the darkness, and Cal fired to one side of it, just to induce the Indians to continue lying low. Then Sam was inside the cabin, and Cal slammed the door shut.

"Had to go slow," panted Sam. "Couldn't take a chance of spillin' all that water. Here, Cal, you take it. Toss it up toward the roof. Soak them logs."

Cal lifted the bucket of water and tossed the fluid up through the holes in the roof. He heard a hissing as the water hit the flames above. The ruddy light died down. The fire hadn't taken hold yet. The bucket was still a quarter full.

Cal wiped his forehead, then turned to glance at Sam. An arrow had transfixed the upper part of Sam's arm.

"Kind of in the way," commented Sam. "Here, Call, pull it through."

"It's gonna hurt, Sam."

"Don't be a danged fool. Pull it through."

Cal grabbed the arrowhead, pulled hard. The arrow seemed to yield reluctantly. Finally Cal got it through the flesh, and let it drop hastily to the ground.

"Didn't hit a muscle," Sam said cheerfully. "Wonder what they'll do next."

"More fire arrows," suggested Cal.

"Don't think so. Most of 'em bounce off."

Silence enveloped the cabin. Outside it was now so dark that Cal, peering out,

could catch only an occasional sparkle from the water of the stream. Beyond the stream was an area of total blackness, where no shadows were distinguishable.

Cal broke the silence. "Sam," he whispered, "we made a mistake comin' here."

"Fine time to be thinkin' of that. What's the mistake?"

"We ain't got no neighbors. If we had any neighbors, them Injuns would never have attacked us."

Sam grunted. "We were lucky to find a good claim, with nobody fightin' us for it."

"Except the Injuns."

"Except the Injuns," admitted Sam. "And they ain't after gold. We got ten thousand dollars in dust for each of us already. If we'd worked along with the others, we wouldn't have had a thousand by now."

"We'd have lived to enjoy it, Sam."

"I'm livin' to enjoy mine," returned Sam stubbornly. "I don't know about you, Cal, but I ain't goin' to let no Injun kill *me*. I got to use that money, and I got to persuade Deborah to marry me."

"I ain't thinkin' of marriage no more," said Cal. "I'm just thinkin' of livin'."

Something was scraping outside the cabin. Cal listened uneasily.

"Them Injuns have snuck up on us!" he whispered.

"The door's locked," returned Sam, also in a whisper. "And they can't see to shoot us inside here any more than we can see to shoot them."

But Cal could sense that Sam was just as uneasy as he was. The scraping continued for a minute or two, then died away. And once more a red glow fell on the floor of the cabin.

"They've set fire to it again!" groaned Cal. "And this time yuh won't be able to run for water, Sam!"

"Quick, douse the fire with what's left in the bucket!"

Sam swung the bucket, saw the red gleam die away. But another red glow was coming from the other side of the cabin. And now the bucket was empty.

A rifle roared like thunder inside the cabin. One of the Indians had put the muzzle of his weapon in between two logs and pulled the trigger.

Cal's teeth chattered. "We gotta get out of here, Sam, or we'll be shot first and burned alive afterward!"

"Then get movin'!"

Cal sprang for the door, threw it open. Then he was running full tilt up the hill, away from the stream, with Sam after him.

Perhaps the Indians had not expected so sudden a dash. For a second or two nothing came from them but wild whoops of triumph, and Cal was beginning to hope that they would reach safety. Then an arrow sped by him, and a rifle cracked. Sam, running close behind him, choked suddenly and sank to the ground.

"Don't stop for me!" he panted. "Get to Kenyonville! Tell Deborah she's got to get my share of the gold! Go on, yuh lunkhead, don't stop!"

Swept by a feeling of blind terror, Cal continued to run. He heard other shots, but somehow they missed him. An arrow nicked his arm, but did no more than stimulate him to renewed activity.

Then he had reached the shelter of a large rock. He dropped behind it, continued to crawl up the hill.

After a quarter of an hour, he looked back. The cabin was blazing brightly now, and a flickering light fell on the body of Sam Riddle. Cal watched in horror as an Indian bent over Sam's body, then straightened up again. A mop of long black hair dangled from his hand.

Cal felt his own bald skull, shuddered, and then continued to climb as fast as he could. In the dark, the Indians were not attempting to pursue him, and when he thought he was far enough away, he changed his direction, making for Kenyonville. . . .

Deborah Meacham looked up from her oven to stare in astonishment at the torn and bedraggled figure that stood before her.

"He's dead," said Cal Barton huskily. "An Injun scalped him, Deborah."

"Who's dead?"

"Sam. He wanted yuh to know, Deborah, that you was to get his share of the dust."

Deborah Meacham felt her eyes filling with tears. She had always had a soft spot in her heart for Sam, far greater than she had let him know. And now to learn that Sam thought enough of her to leave her everything he owned—

She lifted a corner of her apron to her eyes. Then she burst into open sobbing.

Cal shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

"We gotta warn everybody. Them Injuns might come here."

"They won't come here." Her sobbing stopped, gave way to an expression of anger. "There was only a half dozen of 'em."

"How do yuh know, Deborah?" asked Cal in wonder. "Yuh wasn't there."

"I know because a rider brought word about 'em yesterday. They're Kiowa braves. They broke away from the rest of the tribe after a whisky-seller got 'em drunk. Then they stole some more whisky and started lookin' for scalps."

"They shore found a good one," admitted Cal.

Deborah's eyes blazed with anger.

"You ran away and left him alone! That's why they killed him!"

Cal shook his head. "They surrounded the cabin, Deborah, and then they burned us out. We both ran because there was nothin' else we could do. Sam was onlucky, and got hit."

"Well, I ain't gonna let them braves get away with murderin' Sam! You're comin' back with me, Cal, and we'll teach them varmints a lesson."

"*We* will?"

She nodded. "You and me, and Doc Collins, and a coupla more that want to marry me. Shucks, I know it ain't me they want, it's my cookin'. But they won't like me any the less for knowin' that Sam left me his dust. And I won't look at any one of them, or feed him another meal, unless they help me go after them braves and give Sam's body decent burial."

It was no more than an hour later that Cal and Deborah, accompanied by three of her suitors, started out on the trail to the cabin near which Sam's body lay. Cal was a little uneasy about the whole thing, feeling that once a man was dead, he was dead, even if he was a partner. So why worry about him?

The other men were no more anxious to go along than he was. But Deborah's threats had proved effective, and they had allowed themselves to be bullied into joining the expedition.

Deborah carried a Winchester repeating rifle, and Cal knew that she could use it. Judging from the expression on her face, those Kiowa braves were in for a bad time. She strode along so vengefully that Cal was a little afraid of her himself.

As they approached the cabin, Deborah held up her hand warningly.

"We'll go careful now," she announced. "We'll see if we can't catch 'em by surprise, the way they caught Sam and Cal."

"What makes yuh think they'll be there at all?" demanded Doc Collins. "They got their scalp and burned the cabin. They ain't fools enough to stay waitin' for somebody to punish 'em."

"They'll stay waitin' because they was full to start with, and they had a lot of whisky with 'em. I don't have to tell *you*, Doc Collins, that when a man is loaded with red-eye he ain't got as much sense as a locoed prairie dog. Or do I?"

Doc Collins winced and made no reply. They went on cautiously, as if they expected to find the braves.

Deborah was leading the way. While they were still a mile from the cabin, she stopped, and gazed up in the air. A thin column of smoke was rising, faintly outlined against a background of fleecy white clouds.

"That's from the cabin," she said. "Still burnin'."

"Mebbe they tossed Sam's body into it," suggested Cal.

"Then I'll toss them! Now spread out, and don't make any noise. You, Cal, watch them clumsy feet of your'n."

It was Deborah who caught the first glimpse of an Indian. One of the braves was lying beside the stream, his head thrust down toward the water, drinking. Deborah drew a bead on him, then lowered her rifle, frowning.

"If I shoot him, the noise will warn the others," she whispered. "Cal, you aim at him, and be ready to shoot the minute I give the word, or anything happens. The rest of us will get closer."

With Deborah still leading, the other men moved forward. Another brave was lying, apparently sleeping, not far from the cabin. Deborah assigned another of her suitors to pick him off at a given signal.

There were no other Indians in sight. Deborah hesitated.

"I wonder—" she began.

A rifle shot sounded suddenly from in back of them, where Cal and another of Deborah's suitors had been stationed. The Indian who had been sleeping was up like a flash and a knife was in his hand. Two more rifles cracked at the same time, the knife flew upward, and he went down. But was up immediately, running as fast as he could as was another Indian who had been sneaking up.

A loud whoop came from the rocks on the other side of the stream. Deborah's own rifle went off, and then she dropped to the ground.

"Take cover, boys!" she ordered. "Don't give 'em nothin' to shoot at."

Doc Collins had taken cover so well that not even the muzzle of his rifle showed. To Deborah, looking around in amazement, he seemed to have faded into thin air.

She saw Cal Barton crawling up toward her.

"You danged fool," she said. "I ordered you not to shoot yet. You gave the alarm."

"I couldn't help it, Deborah. I think he heard us. He was gettin' away."

"Hit him?"

Cal nodded. "He's dead."

"That pays for Sam," she said. "Now for the others."

A rifle shot spat at them from across the stream. Then a pair of arrows sang through the air. Deborah fired at the flash of the rifle, and a body slumped forward across a rock.

"Gosh, Deborah!" whispered Cal in awe. "Yuh shore can shoot. Did Sol learn yuh?"

"I learned him," retorted Deborah grimly. "Keep your eye peeled, Cal. You never know what them braves'll be up to next."

What they were up to next was escape. Deborah realized that as soon as she saw a brave move backward from a rock, then duck around a corner. They had had enough of this unprofitable fighting.

The sight encouraged her. For scalping Sam Riddle they deserved to pay, and she was determined to collect every bit of the payment due.

"They're gettin' away, boys!" she cried. "Don't let 'em! Charge!"

Her sudden rush toward the braves took them and her own men by surprise. Cal Barton, confused, followed hesitantly, but the other men prudently remained under cover.

A pair of bullets sang over Deborah's head, an arrow stuck into the ground at her side and remained there quivering. Then the braves broke from cover and began to run. Deborah fired again and again, but without doing any damage. The last of the Kiowas reached the top of the ridge, flung himself over, and the battle had ended.

Deborah surveyed her suitors with contempt.

"So you want to marry me?" she sneered. "Shucks, there ain't a man among you! There was one, but he's dead now, and scalped, and I'm goin' to see if I can find his body to give it decent burial. As for the rest of you—"

"Would yuh have married Sam, Deborah?" asked Cal.

"I shore would, but I didn't know my own mind. And now he's dead, poor soul—"

"No, he ain't," said a weak voice coming from a tree branch overhead.

Then a body slid off one of the branches, and dropped to the ground. Deborah stared, screamed, and then behaved as unlike an Indian fighter as possible. She fainted.

When she came to, Sam Riddle was standing beside her.

"Shucks, Deborah, I'm plumb disappointed in yuh. Passin' out like that."

"Oh, Sam, I thought it was yore ghost." Deborah turned to Doc Collins. "Will he live, Doc? Will be live?"

"He oughtn't to," replied Doc Collins. "But any man who can stay alive this long after being shot twice with arrows and three times with bullets, being scalped, and falling out of a tree has got medical science buffaloed. I don't know."

"I feel all right," said Sam. "After that Injun scalped me I was afraid he might take a coupla whacks at me with his tommyhawk, so I bided my chance and hid up that tree. He was too drunk to know what had happened. I'm all right, just a mite weak. But yore cookin', Deborah, will make that pass."

"But yuh ain't got no scalp . . . Oh!" Deborah caught herself, then looked at Sam indignantly.

There was a sheepish expression on Sam's face.

"That Injun didn't get my real scalp—only my wig," he confessed. "I kept it on all the time, and even Cal didn't know I wore one."

"Well, I ain't marryin' no bald runt—"

"Yuh promised, Deborah, and I'm holdin' yuh to yore word," replied Sam masterfully. "You yoreself said I was the only real man in the bunch."

He turned toward the others.

"You fellers run along and leave me alone with my feeansay. You, too, Cal."

"Shucks, Deborah, are yuh takin' orders from him?"

"You bet she is," said Sam.

Deborah nodded meekly.

"So run along, Cal, and don't feel too bad. We'll invite yuh to dinner once in a while. Won't we, Deborah?"

Deborah nodded again. There was a look of worshipful resignation on her face as she stared at Sam's bald head.

"Just like Sol," she sighed. "Just like Sol."

AMBITIOUS ENGINEERS

HAVE YOU HAD *YOUR* COPY OF "ENGINEERING OPPORTUNITIES?"

Whatever your age or experience—whether you are one of the "old school," or a newcomer to Engineering anxious to hold your position in the more difficult days of peace—you must read this highly informative guide to the best paid Engineering posts.

The Handbook contains, among other intensely interesting matter, particulars of **B.Sc., A.M.I.C.E., A.M.I.Mech.E., A.M.I.E.E., A.M.I.A.E., A.M.I.P.E., A.M.Brit.I.R.E., CITY AND GUILDS, CIVIL SERVICE** and other important Engineering Examinations; outlines courses in all branches of **CIVIL, MECHANICAL, ELECTRICAL, AUTOMOBILE, RADIO, TELEVISION, AERONAUTICAL and PRODUCTION ENGINEERING, DRAUGHTSMANSHIP, GOVERNMENT EMPLOYMENT, BUILDING** (the great after-war career), **"R.A.F. MATHS.," MATRICULATION,** etc., and explains the unique advantages of our Employment Department.

WE DEFINITELY GUARANTEE "NO PASS — NO FEE"

If you are earning less than £10 a week, you cannot afford to miss reading **"ENGINEERING OPPORTUNITIES"**; it tells you everything you want to know *to secure your future* and describes many chances you are now missing. In your own interests we advise you to write for your copy of this enlightening guide to well-paid posts NOW—**FREE.**

BRITISH INSTITUTE OF ENGINEERING TECHNOLOGY

319 SHAKESPEARE HOUSE, 17, 18 & 19 STRATFORD PLACE, LONDON, W.1

THE B.I.E.T. IS THE LEADING INSTITUTE OF ITS KIND IN THE WORLD

Join the Well-Paid Ranks of the TRAINED MEN

MANY THOUSANDS MORE ARE URGENTLY NEEDED. PREPARE YOURSELF FOR A BETTER POSITION AND BETTER PAY.

Ambitious men everywhere have succeeded through I.C.S. Home-Study Courses. So also can you.

We offer you the benefit of our 53 years' matchless experience as the creative pioneers of postal instruction.

If you need technical training, our advice on any matter concerning your work and your career is yours for the asking—free and without obligation. Let us send you full information about I.C.S. Training in the subject in which you are specially interested. DON'T DELAY. Make "ACTION" your watchword.

The successful man DOES to-day what the failure INTENDS doing to-morrow. Write to us TO-DAY.

——————USE THIS COUPON——————

(*Penny* Stamp on *Unsealed* Envelope)

INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOLS LTD.

Dept. 18, INTERNATIONAL BUILDINGS, KINGSWAY, LONDON, W.C.2

Please send Special Free Syllabus on.....

.....

Name.....

.....**Age**.....

Address.....

.....

.....

The I.C.S. offer Courses of Instruction in a wide range of subjects, including :

Accountancy
Advertising
Aero Engine Fitting
Aero Fitting and Rigging
Aeronautical Engineering
Aeroplane Designing
Air-Conditioning
Architecture
Architectural Drawing
Auditing
Boiler Engineering
Book-keeping
Building Construction
Building Contracting
Business Training
Business Management
Cabinet Making
Carpentry
Chemical Engineering
Civil Engineering
Clerk of Works
Colliery Management
Colliery Overman
Commercial Art
Concrete Engineering
Cost Accountancy
Cotton Manufacturing
Diesel Engineering
Draughtsmanship
Drawing Office Practice
Electrical Engineering
Engineering Charge
Eng. Shop Practice
Fire Engineering
Fitting and Turning
Forgeman
Foundry Work
Garage Management
Gas-Power Design
Ground Engineer
Heating and Ventilating
Hydraulic Engineering
Hydro-Electric
Insurance
Joinery
Journalism
Machine Designing
Machine-Tool Work
Marine Engineering
Mechanical Drawing
Mechanical Engineering
Mine Electrician
Mine Fireman
Mine Surveying
Mining Engineering
Motor Engineering
Motor Mechanic
Moulding
Office Training
Oil-Power, Electric
Patternmaking
Quantity Surveying
Radio Engineering
Radio Servicing
Refrigeration
Sales Management
Salesmanship
Sanitary Engineering
Scientific Management
Secretarial Work
Sheet-Metal Work
Ship Draughtsmanship
Short Story Writing
Smithing and Forging
Steam Power Design
Structural Steelwork
Surveying
Telegraph Engineering
Telephone Engineering
Templating
Textile Designing
Toolmaking
Turner
Welding, Gas & Elec.
Woodworking
Woollen Manufacturing
Works Engineering
Works Management

EXAMINATIONS—
Technical, Professional, Matriculation
(*State your Exam. on Coupon for Free Syllabus*)

Special Terms for members of H.M. Forces

ICS

Published by The Atlas Publishing and Distributing Co. Ltd., 18 Bride Lane, London, E.C.4.
Printed by Morrison & Gibb Ltd., London and Edinburgh.
Sole Agents for Australia and New Zealand: Gordon & Gotch (Australasia) Ltd.